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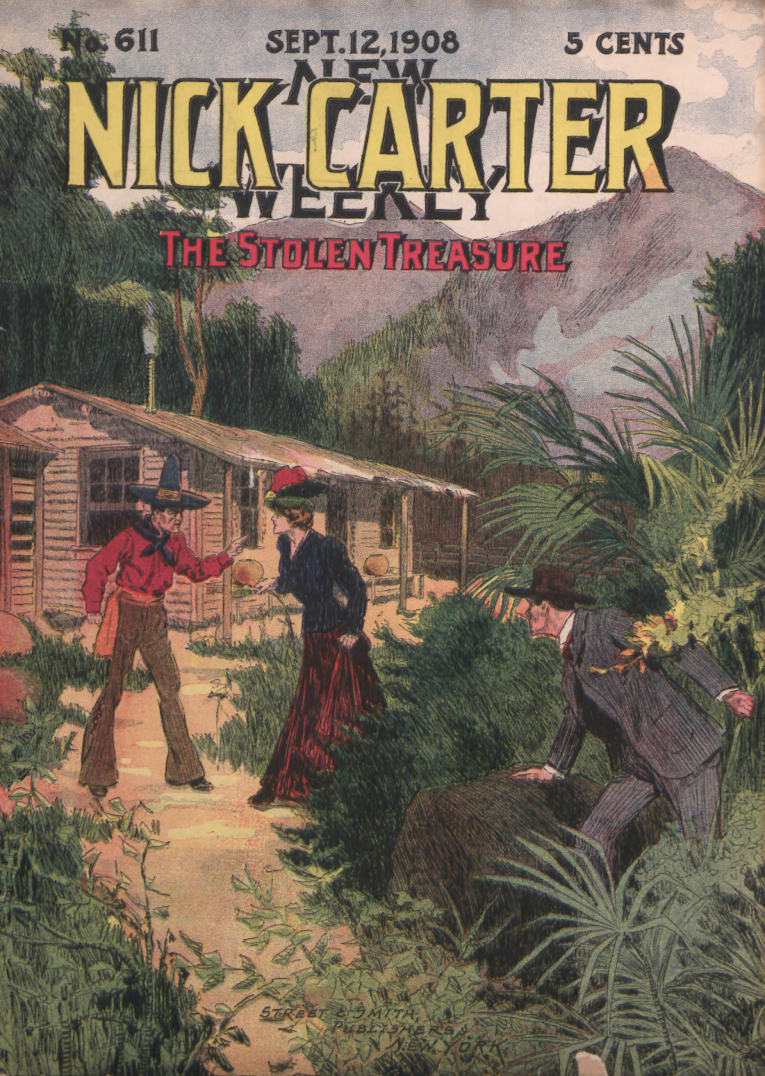
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE STOLEN TREASURE



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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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The Stolen Treasure;

OR,

Nick Carter's Adventures in a Mysterious Castle.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

HOW A TREASURE WAS STOLEN.

"Chick, I wish you would refer to the Case Book and tell me just how long ago it was that I worked out that 'Hacienda Plot,'" remarked Nick Carter, raising his eyes from a letter he had been reading and addressing his first assistant who was seated at the opposite side of the room. "You remember it, don't you?"

"Yes; I think so. You refer to the matter of young Tranquilino Corona, don't you? The boy you found in the rain on Broadway, one night?" *

"Yes."

There were a few moments of silence after that while the assistant did as he had been requested; and then he replied:

"It is eight months, approximately. To be exact it would be exactly eight months, four days from now."

There was a moment of silence and then the detective said:

"Listen, Chick, and I will read a letter to you." Then he read aloud:

"'Honored and respected Señor, Don Nicholas Carter, New York City, N. Y., U. S. A.

"'This letter is written by the hand of a friend who undertakes to express it to you in the English language also; because it is impossible for me of myself to write at all in any language since I never went to school and have not the distinguished qualifications of reading and writing. If you will look at the end of this letter before you proceed farther you will find that my name is written there and my mark added thereto, for I am Secundino Soto, one time bandit of the Guerrero mountains as were my fathers before me; but now at the present writing more especially that same Secundino Soto who for many years served Don José Miguel Filipi Neri del Corona, and his respected father before him and who not many months ago assisted you to escape with the young Caballero Don Tranquilino Angel José Maria Neri del Corona y Agramonte, his son, through the fastnesses of the mountain of Ixtaccihuatl.'"

"Goodness!" exclaimed Chick. "When does the

*See No. 610 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, "Nick Carter's Strangest Case; or, The Hacienda Plot."

letter begin? That is only the introduction isn't it?"

"Yes. It is from Secundino."

"Really?" asked Chick, laughing. "It would seem that he has gone to considerable pains, not to say the use of many words to assure you of that much."

"You see, Chick, Secundino cannot write, and so he has gotten some one to do it for him."

"And 'some one' has spread himself; eh?"

"Rather. Nevertheless the letter is interesting."

"It ought to be after all that preamble."

"You shall judge for yourself.

"'You will remember, señor, that after our escape from the volcanic mountain where we were fortunate enough to make captives of the two people who had plotted against the life and happiness of my young master, (I refer to that woman who had posed as Tranquilino's mother, but who was really his mother's sister; and also to that other person who assisted her in her plots, named Don Patricio Bernal), we conducted the young master to the city of Mexico where he was finally placed in the care of the good people appointed by the government who undertook to see that no manner of harm should come to him, and——'"

"One moment, Nick, if you please. Would you mind telling me what that letter is about?" the assistant asked.

"If you are only patient a little while, you will find out," replied the detective, with a smile.

"I suppose so; but life is a transitory thing, you know. All of us do not live out the allotted three score and ten."

"Well, if you do not care to hear the letter——"

"Oh, yes, I do. Really."

"Then don't interrupt me again."

"Very well."

The detective proceeded with the reading:

"'——and that I remained also in the city to watch over him as best as I could and to act as his servant. You will remember also that the woman who called herself Donna Mercedes, little Lino's mother, but who was really Donna Carmen, his aunt; that she and the man Don Patricio were given the limits of the city and ordered not to leave it on pain of imprisonment. (If I do not explain myself so that you will understand me you must write and let me know and I will endeavor to make it more plain).'"

"That is at least extremely considerate of him," said Chick, laughing aloud.

"Chick, if you interrupt me again——"

"I won't; honestly."

"See to it that you do not."

"Yes. But really, does he ever get down to facts?"

"Oh, yes; as you will soon discover."

"Good! Go on, then."

"'For a time after you departed hence, señor, everything went along with great smoothness so that no person could complain. Tranquilino was in the care of the good sisters who took charge of him, and the woman and the man to whom I have already made reference, went to live in a house that is located on the Avanida Juarez which as you are aware fronts upon the Alameda and is only a short distance from that great statue of bronze which is called affectionately El Caballito. Three nights ago from the present moment of writing, señor, a closed carriage that was accompanied by several horsemen, (it is not known how many there were), waited at El Caballito at midnight; and while they waited, the house wherein young Tranquilino slept, was entered by force, although in silence and the young master was carried away bodily. He was taken to the waiting carriage at El Caballito and from there transported Heaven alone knows whither, save for those who did the transportation, for they do doubtless know about it. And this is all that is known about that disappearance of the young master, although during the day that followed information came to the city that the Hacienda de las Aguas, which is the home of the young master, in the State of Puebla, was entered and robbed, and then was set on fire so that the interior of it was burned; which could not happen to the walls of it because they are of stone, and not burnable, as you are aware. But that is not all, the place was robbed before it was burned. All the silver and gold plate which has belonged to the Coronas since the time of Cortez, very long ago, was stolen; and also those people who robbed the place discovered and stole the treasure which has been hoarded together for many years and generations by the Coronas.

"It is now something that is strange that I must acquaint you with. It was supposed that Tranquilino's father, Don José; his mother, Donna Mercedes; the old administrator, Pancho; the serving woman, Anita; and I, Secundino, were the only living persons who knew even of the existence of that treasure, let alone its hiding-place, which was very secret and approached only by a studied plan. And of all these persons the two first mentioned are supposed to be dead or in captivity in a foreign land, the third—

Pancho—is known to be dead; the fourth—Anita—is thought also to be dead, of which there seems to me no doubt, and that leaves remaining only me, Secundino, as having knowledge of the secret. But as it was not known that I knew about it, and as I have not thought about it or spoken about it at all I do not count as one who may have given the information which led to the robbery. And now, señor, the robbers have escaped, not alone with the treasure, which is immense, but with the person of the young master, which is of far greater value than the treasure. At the same time there are missing from the city, the persons of the woman and the man above mentioned, who are the plotters and now who are no doubt the doers of these deeds. Since the taking of the boy, diligent search has been made, although nothing has been discovered save that it is the opinion of the chief of police who is your good friend that they have made their way to some secret place on the coast and from thence by private vessel to an American port, which would be named Galveston, or New Orleans or some other, so I am informed, señor. That is all, señor, save that I await your orders; and while doing so I remain as always, kissing your hand in servitude, and with all respectful salutations, and calling down blessings upon you,

"'SECUNDINO SOTO. (His X mark).'"

"It that all?" asked Chick.

"Yes. And there is a faithful servant, if ever there was one, Chick."

"I don't doubt it in the least."

"He has expressed himself as best he could, with the assistance of the person who wrote the letter for him. But say what you please, stripped of all the stilted phraseology, the letter is very much to the point."

"It certainly is."

"The boy has been stolen away again. That is the gist of it. And the treasure——"

"By the way, did you know anything about that treasure? It is the first time I have ever heard its existence mentioned."

"No. It is also the first time I ever heard of it."

"Do you think the reference to it may be relied upon?"

"Yes. Whatever old Secundino says, is true. You may depend upon that."

"He does not say of what it consisted."

"No; only that it was very rich."

"Well, what are you going to do about it, Nick?"

"I don't know. For one thing, however, if the day does not bring me a letter from the chief of police, I shall wire him for particulars."

"Then you will interest yourself in the case?"

"Certainly. I am about the only real friend that boy Tranquilino has got, save Secundino."

"I suppose that means another trip to Mexico."

"On the contrary. That man and woman who have plotted so desperately to get possession of the estate and treasure belonging to Tranquilino, will now leave Mexico as far behind them as possible. There is no doubt in my mind that they are even now somewhere within the United States."

CHAPTER II.

THE LEGEND OF THE CASTLE.

There is located in the State of Vermont, in what might be called the south-central part of the state, a spur of the Green Mountains which is locally known as "Pereu Mountain." And this name, although singular in its numerical significance, really refers to three mountain peaks which lift their heads toward the sky from the ridge of the huge hogback so named.

Between the peaks mentioned there are passes east and west, and of the two, the one farther north is locally called the "Dorset" road. The word "trail" is never used in that locality, but even that elastic definition of a pass would scarcely give an idea of the utter roughness of the road in many places, or convey to the mind of the reader the heights and depths of the ravines on one side of it—they would be called cañons in the West— and the cliffs on the other side. The word "Pereu" is a local adaptation of "Peru."

The region to the northward from the Dorset road is as wild now as it was two hundred years ago, save only where woodmen have entered upon it at one time and another and chopped down the old growth of forest. But those spaces have grown up to thicker forests of brushwood, littered by tops of dead trees scattered about, until the whole district is practically impassable.

It has become a wilderness in the true sense of the word.

Now, hidden away at some distance north of the Dorset road, where no path whatever leads to it at present, is a building of stone about whose history the oldest inhabitant of the region can tell you nothing, although many of them will pretend to do so.

But the fact is that nothing is known about it.

The "oldest inhabitant" will remember that his grandfather, or great grandfather remembered, because he got the story from *his* grandfather, who received it from still an earlier generation, that the house was built during the reign of Louis XIV of France, by a fugitive French noble whose life was forfeit to the crown, but who managed to escape to that wilderness with all his gold and jewels amounting to an immense fortune.

The story, when told, stated that the French nobleman escaped from France to Quebec with his treasures, and thence made his way, partly by water and partly over land, to the point mentioned, accompanied by more than a hundred faithful followers who built for him the castle of stone on Peru mountain.

But all that has nothing to do with our present story, although the old stone castle, the very existence of which is unknown even to many who live within a few miles of it, has everything to do with the tale.

We will refer to it merely as "The Castle" since it has no name that is remembered, although there are doubtless several stories connected with it which would well be worth the telling.

There was a certain morning in June when Nick Carter left the passenger-train at a station called Chester, in Vermont, which is twenty miles away from the base of Peru mountain.

It was a morning just two weeks after the receipt of the letter quoted in the preceding chapter, during which interval the detective had not been idle concerning the information contained therein.

The result of it was that when he left the train he was accompanied by three persons, who were his two assistants, Chick and Patsy, and also the Secundino Soto * whose name had been signed to the letter.

Secundino was a Mexican and a typical one. He spoke no word of English, and hence all the conversation between the four was conducted in Spanish, but as we will invariably give a free translation of what was said it will not be necessary to refer to that fact again.

Secundino also wore his costume of Mexico, which was picturesque, and which had excited much attention toward him while they were on the cars, and which attracted the countrymen of that locality. But inasmuch as the four remained in Chester until evening, and made their ride across the lesser mountains through Londonderry and to Peru mountain in the night, there were very few who knew of their presence, and none who understood where they went or what their business was.

They timed themselves, or rather Nick Carter did it for them so that they arrived in the Dorset pass at sunrise, and they presently made camp beside a mountain brook, a mile or two northward from the pass, where breakfast was prepared, and where they intended to spend the time until the morning of the following day, in order to get the rest they needed, and also in order to allow time for some reconnoitering which the detective regarded as necessary.

Nick and his assistants were more or less familiar with that locality. They had been there before, only several years had passed since then.

Secundino was a born mountaineer, and was at home in any sort of mountains, no matter where they might be located. He knew the signs of the wilderness as well in Vermont, as in Mexico; would have understood them quite as well in the Himalayas, or the Andes.

They had made the journey from Chester on horseback, having brought saddles and other necessary accouterments with them on the train; and then had led two packhorses, well provided with such necessaries as they might require.

"It seems to me," remarked Patsy, when their breakfast was about finished, and while he was refilling his cup from the coffee-pot, "that this is rather a radical change in the scene of operations, chief; from Mexico to Vermont."

The detective nodded and smiled.

"It is, rather," he admitted. "One, too, that I would not have anticipated."

"How do you suppose they"—meaning the persons referred to in the letter, who had stolen the treasure, and with it the boy Tranquilino—"ever thought of coming here? I can't understand it."

"Nor I; only on one hypothesis—that is, if they *have* come here. Don't forget that it is only a conjecture on my part that they have done so."

"I know. But you don't often make mistakes about such things. It goes without saying that we will find them here. Now, how do you suppose they ever heard of this place?"

"Well," replied the detective, "there is only one method of explaining it that I can think of just now, and that may be far from correct. It is based upon nothing more tangible than what little I have been able to learn about the previous history of this woman, Carmen Agramonte, the sister of Tranquilino's mother."

*See No. 610, Nick Carter Weekly.

"You haven't thought it necessary to tell us anything about that, as yet," said Chick.

"No; there hasn't been time. But I will do it now."

"Well?"

"Carmen and her sister, who afterward became the wife of Don José Corona and the mother of Tranquilino, were sent to a convent near Paris, to be educated, when they were mere girls. Carmen ran away and married a Frenchman, who is doubtless the Don Patricio of this particular case. He was a crook and he made her one. One of her exploits, so the chief of the Paris police has cabled me, was to pass herself off successfully for nearly three years, as the countess of Blanc. But she was betrayed and sent to prison for it, from which she escaped. But the family of the countess whom she impersonated is the same family whose ancestors, or at least one branch of them, came to this country during the reign of Louis XIV and built the castle which is located somewhere back of us now, in the forest.

"There is an old legend in that family, as I happen to know, which relates that the ancestor who came here, brought with him an immense fortune which since he had no means of spending it, he buried, or hid away somewhere, within the walls of the castle, where it still is. Now it is more than likely that during the imposture which Carmen practised when she posed as the countess, she learned of all that; which is point one."

"Yes."

"Next, there were two men killed at the time the hacienda in Mexico was robbed of the treasure that belongs to Tranquilino. One of them was of the assaulting party, and upon him the chief of police of Mexico found some directions written in Spanish which indicated two places in this state. One of them was Chester, through which place we came here; the other was Manchester, which is over the mountain to the westward from here, thus placing this locality where we find ourselves this morning, exactly between the two. That is point two."

"Yes."

"Again, and lastly, there is the discovery I made at the Grand Central Station, after some careful inquiries, that one week ago—which would be about the right time, allowing for the traveling they had to do for them to have arrived in New York—a party of twelve people, many of whom were unmistakably Mexicans, took tickets for Claremont Junction, New Hampshire, which is only just far enough beyond Chester, Vermont, where we left the train, to throw inquiring people off their trail. That is point three."

"Well?"

"Telegraphic inquiry over the line could not ascertain just where those twelve people left the train on which they were passengers, so it is to be supposed that they did so singly and at different stations, in order further to throw possible searchers off their trail; and that they afterward got together somewhere between Brattleboro and White River Junction. At any intervening point between those two, they could have started for this place. That is point four, and the last one."

"It doesn't tell us very much, does it?"

"No; and yet it does, too."

"They would not find it easy to discover this place, merely from a hearsay learned in Paris."

"That is true; but we don't know that Carmen has not searched for and found it before. And concerning that point, I have another idea."

"What is it?"

"I don't believe that Tranquilino's mother is really dead, although I think the fiends have killed his father."

"Well?"

"When we captured Carmen and Don Patricio, on the mountain of Ixtaccihuatl, in Mexico, as referred to in Secundino's letter, Carmen in her anger so far forgot herself as to say that she had *not* killed Mercedes *because she could not kill her own sister;* and she stated in so many words that Donna Mercedes was imprisoned where we would never be able to find her. Now what more likely place could there be than this one?"

"That is so."

"So I have figured it out that Carmen's original purpose in coming to this country from France, was to search for and find this old castle, in the hope of unearthing the legendary treasure of the old French nobleman; that her plots against her sister were secondary, when she could not find the older treasure. But it all means that she must have come directly here, and therefore that she knew all about this place before she went to Mexico at all."

"I guess that is good logic," said Patsy, with conviction.

"I think it is," replied the detective. "At all events I was sufficiently well convinced of it to determine to come here."

"We are likely to have a warm time of it, then; eh?"

"Possibly."

"Without counting the don and the woman, there are supposedly ten men with them; and they are all men who are used to fighting."

"There are more likely to be a score of men; or fifty, or even a hundred, for all we know, Patsy. Doubtless there were several already here, waiting. It is likely that others than the party we know about have come by other routes."

"That's so."

"We will find, I think, that there are at least a score of men here."

"Well, the more, the merrier, chief."

CHAPTER III.

THE CASTLE AND THE CAVERN.

It was an hour later when Nick Carter motioned to Secundino to follow, and leaving his assistants in charge of the camp, led the way through the forest in the direction where the castle was supposed to be located.

"I visited the castle once, ten years ago," he told Secundino. "It is a queer old place. The people about here have left it severely alone for the reason that it is supposed to be haunted by ghosts. Frightful stories have been told about it. I don't suppose there is a countryman round about here who would willingly go within a mile of it."

"Big place?" asked the Mexican.

"Yes. Very large. It covers an immense tract of ground. It was built to accommodate more than a hundred men. It is a stone building two stories in height at the front, and about two hundred feet long from end to end. There is a rampart along the edge of the roof, chin-high, from behind which they could fight off the Indians, for there were many savages here when it was built. A square tower stands above the center of the building—twenty feet square I should say, with windows on every side. There are three stories above the main roof, in that tower. At the rear of the building, it hangs over a ravine that is really a rocky cañon, and the castle was built into this, so that it goes down four stories lower, on that side."

"You never explored it?" asked Secundino.

"No. I had not the time when I was here. I have told you all I know about it. I only looked upon it from the outside, determining to return here sometime to explore it; but I have never done so. I know of one thing that may aid us, however."

"What is that, señor?"

"I know of the existence of an extensive cave in the rocks in another ravine that is half a mile away. That cave is my real purpose in bringing you out here this morning."

"Why?"

"I wish to find it again, if I can, and to discover if we may not use it as a headquarters and camping-place until we determine if there is anybody living in the castle. It will be a good hiding-place, and I wish to conduct this search as secretly as possible, until we know precisely what we must contend with."

"I understand, señor."

"So we will pay no attention to the castle itself, today, unless, of course, we find it necessary to do so. We are to find the cave, and to prepare to move our things to it when found, if it is available."

It was four miles from where they started, to the castle, and the way was through a tangled growth of underbrush against which it was at times next to impossible to advance.

They came out upon a ledge of rock above a ravine in sight of the castle, about noon, and looking across the gulf at their feet, it was plainly in view.

They were in fact, directly opposite it, half a mile away, and they faced that part of the structure which Nick had described as being built over and into the ravine.

The castle really looked as if it were six stories in height, not counting the tower, from where they were standing.

It was a picturesque sight from their point of vantage.

One wondered how such a pile of stone could ever have been erected where it was. Only a refugee Frenchman of the time of Louis XIV would ever have undertaken such a task; and even with all the help he was said to have had, it must have taken years to build the structure.

Suddenly Nick seized his companion and drew him backward among the bushes. At the same time he brought forth from one of his pockets a pair of small but powerful binoculars which he quickly adjusted and put to his eyes.

But Secundino's keen eyes, accustomed to scanning long distances in the mountains of his native country, needed no binoculars.

He, too, saw what the detective was studying

through the glasses, and he smiled in a way which was not pleasant to see.

"They are there. We have made no mistake," said the detective at last, lowering the binoculars and returning them to his pocket.

Secundino nodded.

"I saw the woman herself, taking exercise on the roof," continued the detective. "Did you see her?"

"Yes, señor."

"And the man beside her?"

"Yes."

"It was Don Patricio."

"It was. I recognized him, señor."

"There were other men, several of them, over beyond where they walked together."

"There were four others."

"Your eyes are keen, Secundino."

"They have need of keenness in the country where I came from."

"Yes. That is true."

"What shall we do next, señor?"

"We must find the cave I spoke about."

"Is it near here?"

"It is in this ravine, yes. But on the opposite side. It is on the same side as the castle, half a mile or less above here."

"Then we must cross the—what do you call it? It is an arroyo; no? Or a baranca?"

"Neither. It is a ravine."

"We must cross it?"

"Yes; above here. There is a place."

"And our horses? We cannot get them to it, can we?"

"No. They must be taken back down the road to that field we saw just at daylight. There is plenty of feed and water for them there."

"I remember. Well—and now?"

"Follow me, Secundino."

They dived into the forest again, and made their way to a distance from the ravine, after which they turned to the right and went a considerable distance before they again veered toward the ravine. But when they approached it, Nick had remembered his direction so well that they came out exactly at the point where a narrow pathway, evidently in use at the time of the builders of the castle but now greatly obstructed, led down to the bottom of the gulch.

There was a rushing torrent at the bottom, but they crossed it by means of boulders of rock that had fallen from the cliffs, and presently began an ascent on the opposite side.

Here again there was evidence that a regular path had once been made, although the eye would not have discovered it without careful searching.

But enough of it remained to afford them a foothold, and so after climbing a distance, they at last came to a wide ledge along which they made their way, entirely concealed by trailing vines which hung over it from the rocks above them, and so presently came to the mouth of the cavern to which Nick Carter had referred.

Here again a natural veil formed by trailing vines, hung down from the rocks above, and entirely concealed the opening which was so wide and high and otherwise spacious that but for them it could easily have been seen from any part of the other side of the ravine.

But as it was entirely hidden, a more appropriate place for their purpose could not be imagined.

The entrance to the cavern was in the form of a grotto, and there was room within its spacious maw to have received with convenience a hundred men and half as many horses, if they could have reached the place.

Behind that and beyond it, the opening narrowed like the opening into a funnel and finally formed itself into a cavernous gallery or corridor that was easily ten feet wide and high, and which penetrated into depths within the mountain which could not be guessed.

Secundino pointed toward it.

"What lies yonder?" he asked.

"I do not know," the detective replied. "I have never explored beyond a hundred feet. I always meant to return here, but I have never done so before now."

"It is a big place. I have never seen a cavern like it."

"Yes; it is big, surely."

"Perhaps, señor, it is another route to the castle."

"Perhaps so. I have thought of that. We will explore it when we get the rest of our party here."

"I might remain here, señor, and do some exploring while you return for the others. I am accustomed to such places, you know."

"That is a good idea, Secundino. You may do so."

"Thank you, señor."

"And I will start back at once."

"Very well, señor. If you prefer, I might go. There will be much to carry."

"Oh, no. Do as we have agreed."

"I must first provide myself with a sufficient number of torches."

"That will be easy enough. You will find plenty

of pine knots in and around the old stumps and fallen trees, and there are quantities of white birch farther up the side of the ravine."

"White birch, señor?"

"Yes. You have only to peel the bark from it and wind it around a stick. When it is set afire, it burns like oil. It makes a great deal of smoke, but also a good light."

"Then I will be well provided. It is noon now; can you get back here with the others before night, señor?"

"No. I will not try to do so. You will have to remain here alone to-night, but that will be as good a time as any for exploring the cavern."

"Yes."

"We should be here very early in the morning, for I will have them start as soon as we can see."

"Very well, señor. And if I am not here when you arrive——"

"Yes?"

"I will be somewhere inside the cavern, I suppose. I shall carry pieces of the white bark I saw when we came here——"

"That is the white birch I spoke about."

"Yes, señor. I will carry some of it with me and drop pieces of it along the route from time to time so that if you wish to follow you will know which way I have gone. And also if it were necessary they would aid me to find the way back again."

"Right you are, Secundino. Only I know a heap better plan than that one."

"What is it, señor?"

The detective took a ball of white twine from one of his pockets and gave it to the Mexican.

"I remembered that there was a cavern to explore up here," he said, "and I brought several of those with me purposely. Tie the end of it to a clog of wood here, before you begin your explorations, and then unwind it as you advance. It will leave a trail behind you which you can easily follow backward by holding it in your hand, or by rewinding it."

"Thank you, señor."

CHAPTER IV.

A BOTTOMLESS ABYSS.

Nick Carter and his two assistants made that same trip much more quickly the following morning than he had done when Secundino was with him, notwithstanding the fact that each now had a heavy pack to carry.

But he knew the direction and the way, and he succeeded in leading them directly to the point where the old pathway descended into the ravine. This did not afford Chick and Patsy a view of the castle, but they could obtain that later.

The horses had been taken care of the preceding night, after the detective's return, and were safely disposed of in the cleared place he had mentioned to the Mexican, where there was sufficient feed, and water to last them indefinitely; and as there were six of them together, there was little danger that they would wander away.

Besides, they were entirely surrounded by forest, so there would be no inducement for them to do so; and they would not likely be seen, since they were away from the road.

The packs, containing their provisions and other necessaries, were heavy, but the three detectives succeeded in transporting them all right, and they arrived at the bottom of the ravine beneath the opening of the cavern shortly after the sun had risen.

When, however, they reached the mouth of the cavern there was no sign of Secundino; only there was the clog of wood with the end of the twine tied fast to it, as Nick had suggested.

This told them that the Mexican was somewhere inside the cavern, still engaged in his explorations; and they at once set about making their camp as comfortable and homelike as possible.

They had not stopped for breakfast that morning, contenting themselves merely with a cup of cold coffee each; but now they were hungry indeed, and a fire was presently started, made of dry wood so that it would not smoke and betray their presence, and soon breakfast was sputtering merrily over the blaze.

They ate it and then busied themselves anew, but when many hours had passed and they were again hungry, and still Secundino had not returned, they began to ask each other what could be detaining him.

"Did he have anything to eat with him?" Chick asked.

"Yes," replied the detective. "He had the remains of our luncheon of yesterday, sufficient for his needs; and he is not suffering for food no matter where he is."

"Then it follows that he has discovered something that is distinctly interesting or he would have been back here before now."

"I think so, too."

"Shall we have dinner? I am as hungry as a bear."

"We all are. It is the air up here, and the work we have been doing."

"I wish that Secundino had some of this good coffee," remarked Patsy, somewhat later, when they were engaged in eating their dinner.

"So do I," assented Nick. "As soon as we are through eating I will follow that cord into the cavern and see if I can find him."

"Can't we all go?"

"No. There is considerable to do here; and there will be plenty of opportunity later."

So presently, having lighted a pipe and provided himself with a couple of torches, for he preferred to hold his electric torch in reserve for emergencies, Nick seized the trailing cord in the palm of his left hand and started.

For a considerable distance the way was perfectly level and straight; but presently, after he had traversed half a mile or more, he came to a place where the corridor forked like the letter Y, and here the string led off to the right; in other words, it led in the direction of the castle, which was doubtless the reason why Secundino had selected that branch of it.

Now the way became more difficult.

It was partly filled in places with rocks that had dropped from the roof of the gallery; at times it descended precipitously, and at others it ascended as abruptly.

Then it came to an abrupt end so far as the straight gallery was concerned, although, as before, there were two other galleries leading off.

These departed at right angles from the direction he had been following, and the cord followed the one to the left, thus going directly away from the castle.

But Nick accounted for this by supposing that Secundino had followed the other one first, and, finding that it possibly led nowhere at all, or was impassable for some reason, had returned and taken the other one.

And this presently began to wind about in a huge circle until presently he was following along in about the same direction as he had been doing before he made the turn.

And then, abruptly, and with entirely unlooked-for emphasis, the string came to an end.

"Has he used up the cord? Is this the end of it?" Nick asked himself; and then he recalled the fact that before he left Secundino he had given him all the cord he had with him, which had consisted of three full balls.

"No," he replied to his own question, "that could not be the end of all the cord I gave him."

He bent down and examined it by the light of his torch, and found, as he had half-expected he would, that it was frayed at the end, showing that it had been ground apart by contact with the rocks or had been broken by a sudden strain placed upon it.

Several times as he advanced, he had found where Secundino had cast aside his used-up torches, or the burned birch-bark windings of them, and he thought now that if he pursued his way with care, he could trace Secundino by such evidences.

And Nick had three other balls of cord in his pockets, too; so he made an end fast to that other one left by Secundino, and proceeded on his way.

If you have never traced your way through an unexplored cavern as he was doing then and as Secundino had done in advance of him, you will not be able to understand the uncontrollable portentous feeling that comes over one at such a time.

The writer has known men who, to use a figurative expression, would fight a buzz-saw if necessary, yet who would not dare to undertake such an exploration. There is an oppressive portent about the darkness and the silence, and the sense of being far underground, that is inexpressible.

Nick had done this sort of thing often.

The experience was not by any means new to him, and yet he could never quite shake off that sensation here described.

And now, as he advanced, it grew upon him.

He could not disabuse his mind of the feeling that something had happened, although he realized the foolishness of it.

As he continued on his way, it grew rougher and rougher—and then he nearly stepped off into a chasm that appeared to be bottomless.

He started back with a cry of startled surprise rather than of fright, and then he raised the torch he carried, high above his head, and studied his surroundings.

Straight ahead of him in front, there was an abyss across which he could not see; the light from the torch he carried did not penetrate far enough.

On either side of him the walls spread outward, and also disappeared, but there was in no place a foothold where a goat could have stood.

There was absolutely nothing for it, having arrived at such a place, but to turn back and retrace his steps.

It struck him with a sort of chill that Secundino might have lost his torches, and have stepped off into that abyss in the darkness; but then, the Mexican was not given to nervousness, and he was sufficiently ex-

perienced so that if he found himself without a light he would have proceeded with great caution.

He shouted Secundino's name and listened while it echoed and reechoed along the gallery; but there came no reply.

Then he seized a piece of rock and dropped it over into the chasm, and was presently rewarded by hearing a loud splash, far beneath him.

The rock had fallen into a subterranean lake.

He called again and still there was no reply, so it could not be possible that Secundino was still afloat if he had fallen there; and then he threw more rocks in different directions until he became satisfied that the entire space below him was filled with water.

He was turning away finally, with something suggestive of a shudder of apprehension, when he found another cause for dismay.

Ten feet back from the edge of the abyss he discovered fragments of a torch, evidently cast aside or dropped there by Secundino.

It suggested, of course, that the Mexican had been provided with a light when he reached that spot, and so it afforded some relief to his apprehensions; but there was always the idea that it might have been burned out several minutes before it was dropped, or that it might, as it was expiring, have been thrown as far ahead as possible, as is often done in such cases, or again it might have gone out just a moment too soon for Secundino to have seen the chasm in front of him.

But there was no good in remaining there, although the detective did one more thing before he took the back track.

He arranged one of the torches so he could lower it into the gulf without burning off the cord that held it suspended, and so dropped it to the surface of the water.

He saw nothing save the water itself, however.

The cavity in which it rested was circular in form. Nick could not see across it, and for all he knew it might extend indefinitely into the mountain.

He shouted once again, but receiving no reply, turned back, winding up the cord as he did so, and presently arrived at the point where he had tied his own cord to the end left by the Mexican.

The detective now retraced his steps all the way to that first place where he had turned aside; but there he paused while he turned over in his mind the suggestion that occurred just then as to whether he should return at once to the outside and report what had occurred, or make further exploration of the cavern while he was there.

But the former idea finally won, and presently he emerged again at the broad opening and in the presence of his two assistants.

He had about decided by this time that Secundino had actually fallen into the abyss and perished. He could not account for his disappearance in any other manner.

And then, as he stepped forward, he was startled into the utterance of an exclamation of utter astonishment by finding that Secundino was seated on the rocks contentedly munching a bounteous portion of food that had been supplied him.

"Where in the world have you been, Secundino?" he demanded, when his first shock of surprise had passed.

The Mexican looked up and smiled; then with his finger he pointed downward, indicating a direction that was exactly toward the center of the earth.

"Down there," he replied. "Very far, too."

"Did you fall into that pool in the cavern?" asked Nick.

"Yes, señor. And I thought it was the end of me; but fortunately I found a way out of it, and, as Heaven is good, here I am."

"You found a way out of that pool?" exclaimed the detective incredulously.

"Yes, señor. There is a gallery from it directly under the other one, and it leads back again to the place where the main gallery parts in the shape of the letter Y."

CHAPTER V.

A TRAIL THROUGH THE WOODS.

Secundino had had time to explore quite thoroughly the cavern in the mountain before the accident described in the last chapter occurred to him.

Instead of doing as Nick had supposed he would, at the time he followed the trailing cord through the gallery, Secundino had turned to the left on the occasion of his first trip into the place, because as he was one who believed in doing all things thoroughly, it was his intention to make a complete exploration of the cavern as far as it was possible to do so, before the coming of Nick Carter with his assistants to the ravine.

And now, in reply to a question from the detective, Secundino explained how it happened that he had been

so fortunate as to make his escape from the apparently bottomless abyss into which he had fallen in the darkness.

For his torch had gone out and he had cast it aside before he was able to discover the presence of the pitfall in front of him, and, forgetful of the fact that he might be in the vicinity of the well inside the mountain, the same that he had discovered while exploring the other gallery, he had hastened recklessly forward.

The distance from the edge of the abyss down to the water, with which it was partly filled, was approximately thirty feet, and Secundino had gone down very deeply into it when he fell.

But even in that instant he remembered what he had discovered at the end of that other gallery, and after he had risen to the surface and was swimming about in search of some projection of the rocks to which he could cling, he figured it out that he must have fallen into the same pool he had previously looked upon.

He remembered that upon that occasion the water had been almost within reach of his hand when he had stretched himself flat upon the rock holding his torch downward to scrutinize it.

Luck was with Secundino when he struck out so bravely to swim, where the darkness was so utter and entire as to be absolutely impenetrable.

Of course, he had no sense of direction whatever in his mind.

He might as well have swam in one direction as another, and yet he was so fortunate as to head directly for the place which of all others he would have selected had he had any choice in the matter.

Reaching this side of the cavern, he stretched out his hands and discovered as he had hoped he would, a projection of the rock to which he could cling.

Then, when a moment later he reached up with the other hand in search of other supports of the same character, and raised his body part way out of the water in order to do so, his hand rested upon the flooring of some sort of a gallery, and it instantly flashed through his mind that it was the one he had previously explored.

The rest of it requires no explanation.

The way was apparently straight from there to the point where the main gallery branched out in the shape of the letter Y, where, when he reached it, he found the cord he had left there himself, in passing.

"Is there no gallery left which you have not explored?" asked the detective.

"Only one, señor," was the reply.

"Then," said Nick, "it must be that one which leads off directly to the right, from where you turned just before you took your impromptu bath."

"Yes, señor, that is the one."

"I am afraid," said the detective, "that we will have to give up the idea that any one of the galleries of this great cavern will lead us eventually to the castle."

"Unless that one does, to which you have just referred," suggested Chick.

"At all events," continued the detective, "we will not bother any more in making a further effort in that direction at present, although I think it will be a good idea if you or Patsy would use the time while the rest of us are visiting the vicinity of the castle to-night, in exploring it."

"Shall we go to the castle to-night?" asked Secundino.

"Yes, and we will start very soon."

The detective had already informed Chick and Patsy of his discovery made during the afternoon of the preceding day, when he had seen Carmen and Don Patricio together on the roof of the castle.

It was, therefore, a settled thing that the people whom they were pursuing were near-by; and there was very little doubt in the mind of the detective, but that Carmen's sister Mercedes was imprisoned somewhere within those granite walls. And, therefore, Tranquilino was there also.

It might be also that Don José, the boy's father, would be found there, and that he had not been "done away with" as was supposed.

"Certainly, it seemed to the detective, it was of vital importance that he should penetrate secretly to the interior of the castle with as little delay as possible, and search it as thoroughly as it might be done.

Although Nick Carter had never been inside the castle in his life, he had viewed it carefully from the outside; and he knew it to be utterly inaccessible to any one if those within wished to keep one out.

He felt that the whole success of his expedition there depended upon its secrecy.

Should Don Patricio or Carmen or any of their followers discover that there were others present in that forest near them, the task of completing what Nick Carter had gone there to do would be rendered next to impossible.

But if, on the other hand, some secret means of access to the interior of the castle could be found, the remainder of the project would be rendered easy of accomplishment.

It was necessary, also, to discover approximately the number of the enemy.

Nick had knowledge of only twelve persons all told in that company, one of whom was certainly a woman; and, perhaps, there were others with her.

But he felt that this was no criterion upon which he could safely calculate, since others might have been sent there by different routes, so that it was possible the castle might contain, even at that moment, anywhere between a score and three score persons.

His own little company counted only four, as we know.

They waited until the sun had sunk out of sight, and dusk was settling over the hills before they left the cavern and started toward the castle.

Patsy, by mutual consent, was left behind, to follow to its end the only remaining unexplored section of the cavern.

The front of the castle has already been described so far as appearances go.

And it must be added, to what has already been said, that the only door the building appeared to have, on the outside at the front, was a very small affair, not larger than such as are fitted to ordinary houses.

Our three friends paused in the wood directly in front of the castle, distant from it about a furlong.

From there they could see distinctly everything about the front of the building, and while they were watching it with eager eyes, the door that has already been described was suddenly thrown ajar, and Carmen Agramonte came outside, followed by a man who was evidently a servant, since as they left the doorway and passed along a path which led almost directly toward the place where Nick Carter and his friends were concealed, the fellow kept at a respectful distance behind her.

Carmen was dressed in a riding-habit of approved design, and, as she passed into the forest followed by the man who attended her, Nick motioned to Chick and Secundino to remain where they were, and then glided quickly along in pursuit of the two.

The path into which he stepped when he took up their trail was well worn, and it wound in and out among the trees for a considerable distance until at last it emerged upon an extensive clearing, in the midst of which was located another stone structure of much less pretentious character, the existence of which Nick Carter had not before suspected.

The woman waited outside this building while the man entered it. It was plainly a stable, and presently he came forth again leading two saddled and bridled horses, one of which he assisted her to mount while he vaulted upon the back of the other one himself.

Then came a moment of indecision for the detective.

He wished very much to know whither they were going, because their destination might have considerable bearing upon his own further conduct that night. It was too late for the woman to be undertaking any very extended journey, for darkness would soon have settled over the earth, and within the confines of the forest, it would be as black as pitch.

The fact that they took horses at all, however, and that Carmen wore her riding-habit, indicated that the distance was farther than she cared to walk.

Nick watched them as they rode away without uring their horses faster than a walk, and the moment they disappeared among the trees, he came to the decision that he would follow them.

It had not occurred to him to enter the stable and procure a horse for himself, even if there were others there, for he knew that he could not follow them in that manner without running a very much greater risk of discovery than would be the case if he were on foot; and he believed that he could quite readily keep pace with them; as he saw, they had evidenced no inclination to travel more rapidly than the horses could walk, and so Nick skirted the edge of the clearing and pursued them.

The pathway was much broader than the previous one he had followed.

It showed that it had been worn down to its present condition by the constant passing to and fro of horses' shodden hoofs.

As soon as he came upon it, he started forward at a rapid trot, with his elbows held closely at his sides, and his head thrown back like a practised sprinter.

In this way he presently came in sight of them again, where the pathway through the forest was straight for a considerable distance; and after going in this manner for upward of a mile, they turned off abruptly and disappeared.

When the detective reached the point where they had turned, he discovered only very slight evidences of a narrower and less trodden path leading off at right angles to the more important one; and after following this for forty or fifty rods, he came suddenly upon the two horses he had been following, where they had been left by their riders, tied to the trees.

It struck him as being a strange place for those two people to leave their horses, inasmuch as there was

no indication of any possible cause for their visiting there. But that there was some important reason for the evening expedition, he could not doubt.

Nick Carter had had in his experience considerable practise at woodcraft, and he readily found their trail where it led down toward the bottom of a small ravine, and he followed it.

That a surprise awaited him of a character that was calculated to startle him, and to suggest even greater haste in the consummation of his plans, we shall presently discover.

CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

The trail led him presently to another path, not worn, but yet bearing many evidences of having recently been traveled more or less; and it wound downward among the trees until at last it opened suddenly upon a glade, in the midst of which was another stone building, although this time it amounted to nothing more than a mere hut.

But that was not what attracted him as he stopped suddenly at the edge of the clearing; it was the fact that he had suddenly come in sight of the woman he had been following.

She was standing near the open door of the hut, and talking to some person who was inside, out of sight; but even as Nick made the discovery, that person stepped into view. Nick saw then that it was a Mexican—one whom he remembered vaguely to have seen about the hacienda in Mexico. The servant who had accompanied Carmen to the place stood some distance away, evidently waiting for his mistress to finish her call.

The detective could see all that occurred, but he could not hear a word that was uttered.

He realized after a moment that the subject they were discussing was one of considerable interest, for the woman appeared to be greatly exercised about it.

Then, suddenly, as he was wishing with all his heart that he could overhear what was being said, the two began to move toward him, walking side by side while they continued their conversation.

"It is getting late," thought the detective, "and she is making the man walk back toward the horses with her."

In this surmise he presently discovered that he was right, for the pair were soon within hearing distance and walking very slowly.

They were conversing in Spanish, of course, but he understood them perfectly well.

As they came near enough for him to hear, the man was saying:

"One of my men will know all about them before morning. It may be that they are just a party of hunters, who do not suspect that you are here, señora."

"Nonsense," she replied. "This is not the season for hunting in this country. No; if there are strangers in this forest near us, they are enemies. You may rest assured of that, Manuelito."

"Well, as I said before, we will know before morning."

"How many are there?" she asked him.

"I have told you already, señora. There are four."

"Are you sure there are no more?"

"Yes."

"But the four may be only one portion of their party."

"No. There are no others."

"Have you a description of them?"

"No; I know only that there are four men."

"Who was it that discovered them?"

"Pablo."

"Did he not hear the mention of names among them?"

"No. He was not near enough to overhear anything that was said. And he could not have understood them."

"He should have gotten near enough, at least."

"He was afraid that he would be discovered."

"Where were they when he saw them?"

"Out near the road. But this morning, when he went there to see them again, and, if possible, to get closer to them, they had gone."

"Gone! Then if they have gone, we have no more to fear from them."

"But they did not go away."

"Where did they go, then?"

"Into the forest."

"Ha! Do you know that to be true?"

"I know it only as Pablo has told me. He followed their trail for a long distance, and then left it to come here to tell me. That was when I sent word to you, señora, at the castle."

"Where did the trail lead him, as far as he pursued it?"

"To no place at all."

"Toward the castle?"

"No; rather away from the castle. It is on the opposite side of the ravine, and leads away from it as if

they had no intention of turning in this direction. But wherever they have gone I will know about their destination in the morning, for I have sent two of my best trailers to track them down, and to find out all about them. The only difficulty is that even if my men get close enough to listen, they will not be able to understand what the talk is about."

"Well, if we know where they are, that will not so much matter."

"No, señora."

"And, mark you, Manuelito, if those men appear to be here in search of us, they must be shot down without mercy."

"Yes, señora."

"I am not so sure but that it would be well to shoot them, anyhow."

"I don't think so, señora, if you will permit me to say so."

"Why?"

"They might have friends near here who would come in search of them."

"Suppose they did, what difference would that make? They would find nothing, though they should search till the day of doom."

"But they might find that the castle is occupied."

"No. Nobody is ever seen outside it, save late in the day when nobody would be near here to see. And if they should find out that some one is there, they would suppose it another manifestation of the ghosts that haunt it."

"Yesterday, when the señora and the don were on the roof, exercising, I saw them," said Manuel, by way of argument.

The señora laughed.

"Well, suppose you did?" she demanded. "Don't you know that if one of the natives of this part of the world had seen us he would have gone away and reported that he had seen just that many ghosts? That is what he would have supposed them to be."

"But the señora does not look like a ghost; neither does Don Patricio."

"Bah; that makes no difference. Now, litsen to me."

"Yes, señora."

"To-morrow, in the morning, as soon as you have located those people and know of a surety where they can be found, you are to come to the castle after me and take me where I can see them for myself."

"Do you think that will be quite safe, señora?"

"I wish to do it whether it is safe or not. I cannot afford to be disturbed in this place now, and I cannot run any chances of that man, whose name is Nick Carter, finding me again."

"No."

"When you have shown them to me I will determine at once what is to be done about them."

"Yes, señora."

"You say there are four?"

"Yes."

"Then, when we go to see them, you and I will each carry a Marlin rifle; one of the repeaters. You are a dead shot and so am I. If we decide that they must be killed, it need not be postponed. You and I will do it at once."

"Yes, señora," was the calm reply.

They had paused close to where Nick Carter was in hiding while this conversation was being carried on; and now the señora bade the man a quick good night and hurried away, followed by the groom.

It was quite dark by this time and the detective did not fear being discovered, so he followed them closely on their return, arriving at the stable as soon as they had dismounted and the groom had led the horses inside the building.

But Nick waited until the man came out again, and went with his mistress toward the house after which he made his way back to where he had left Chick and Secundino.

"I have some unpleasant news for you," he said to them, "and you, Chick, must return at once to Patsy and warn him of it."

CHAPTER VII.

DRAWING LOTS FOR VICTIMS.

It was a great disappointment to the detective to realize that all his efforts to approach that place in secrecy had been unavailing. But he understood perfectly well how cautious and careful it was necessary for the plotting woman and her companions to be.

"Chick," he said, "our presence is known here. More, the woman suspects who we are. She has given orders already to have us killed. She has even gone so far as to arrange to do some of the shooting herself;" and he described what he had heard near the hut in the forest.

"Whatever is done, must be accomplished this night," he concluded. "Now, I would send Secundino back to inform Patsy, only that I may need him inside the castle with me. Some of the men who are here with Carmen, he knows. At least, many of them

know him. More than that, the boy, Tranquilino, may need him. Again, he knows Don José by sight, and I have never seen him; and even more than that, I think in the light of what has occurred, you should be with Patsy."

"I am willing to go back," replied Chick. "What do you wish us to do after I have found Patsy and warned him?"

"Do whatever your own judgment dictates. Let circumstances govern you. If you think we can hold that cavern against all who may attack us, make it as secure as possible, and arrange for my return there with Tranquilino, and with his father and mother, if I am fortunate enough to find them."

"All right. I will attend to that. Patsy will have explored that remaining gallery by the time I get there."

"Yes. I think so. But don't forget one thing, Chick."

"What is that?"

"Don't forget that we have proof now that these woods are filled with spies. That hut where I followed Carmen to-night, is only one of their many outposts, I am sure. Also, from what was said I was able to gather that there is some method of signaling from there to the castle. If that is true, it follows that there are ways of signaling from the others, no matter where they may be located."

"Yes."

"So be careful. It is night now, and you will not be seen, I think."

"We are to wait in the cavern for you, then?" asked Chick, as he was about to take his departure.

"You are to do about that as you think best. Be governed by circumstances. I will say only this. If, after I have entered the castle, I succeed in finding what I seek, and if we get out of the place all right, I will make at once for the cavern unless I have good reason for not doing so. If I do have such reason, why you must take care of yourselves, and we will do the same; and our rendezvous will be at the clearing where the horses were left."

When Chick was gone Nick motioned to Secundino to follow him and then led the way across the clearing toward the castle.

The night was quite dark by this time, and they reached the walls of the building without danger of being discovered.

The word castle, in describing the building, has been used advisedly, for the windows on the ground floor were all made so narrow that no man of ordinary build could have squeezed through them, even had they not been protected by bars.

But Nick Carter had taken all this into consideration before he approached the place at all and had come prepared; and it was just here where one of Secundino's great talents came into use.

As soon as the two were close to the walls of the building Nick Carter took from beneath his coat a rawhide lariat that he had brought with him, and, passing it to Secundino, he whispered:

"Now, Secundino, it is up to you. I am fairly good with a rope, myself, but you can beat me at it, I fancy. Do you think you can throw a loop over that chimney at the end of the north wing? It is a long cast."

"I can try," replied the Mexican; and he began slipping the coils through his hands, arranging them to suit him; and after a moment he walked softly away toward the point from which the cast was to be made.

The first two attempts was unsuccessful, as were also the third and fourth and fifth; and, in fact, it was not until the tenth effort that the noose at last fell over the top of the chimney, which had been built up from the ground, at the end of the building and on the outside.

But that tenth throw did succeed, and in a moment the stout rawhide was pulled taut, and Nick Carter seized upon it.

"I will go up first," he whispered. "Do you follow me as soon as I am at the top."

To climb up a rawhide rope hand over hand against the smooth side of a building, is not the easiest task in the world, but Nick Carter made it presently; and then he called down to his companion, in a low tone:

"All ready, Secundino. Come up."

They left the rope dangling from the chimney to the ground and made their way cautiously along the flat roof toward a point where they could see a light gleaming through some sort of skylight; and then, as they drew near to it, it was suddenly pushed aside, and Carmen Agramonte stepped out before them, closely followed by Don Patricio.

Had they been alone, those two, Nick would have attacked and captured them then and there, but he could hear the sound of voices of other men coming behind them, and with a quick grasp upon Secundino's arm, he drew the man backward with him and they both threw themselves face downward on the roof.

Fortunately, at the very spot where they dropped down there was a roughly made bench of planks, and, as they were behind it, they were concealed from view

as the man and the woman approached after issuing from the skylight; and the others who followed after them also came forward, so that when the man and the woman seated themselves upon the very bench behind which Nick Carter and Secundino were concealed, the others grouped themselves in front of them.

It was a narrow escape from discovery; but it could not have happened more opportunely, for all that, for the detective could plainly hear every word that was uttered.

Altogether there were six persons at that conference; five men and the woman, Carmen.

"I am satisfied that in some manner our enemy—the man who is named Carter—has traced us to this place and is already quite near us," she began abruptly, as soon as she was seated. "I have called you here to the roof for this conference, because there are those among our own men who should not be told all the truth about the dangers we run. But Nick Carter is concealed somewhere in this forest. I know that. Manuel sent for me to-night to tell me about it. And now, I want you all to understand that there is only one thing to be done."

"Only one," agreed Don Patricio significantly.

"That detective must never leave this forest," continued Carmen, not heeding him at all.

"Well, why can't he be ambushed, and shot?" inquired one of the men.

"That is precisely what must be done, Ignacio," replied the woman. "But it is not all."

"No?"

"There are four in the party. They must all be served in the same manner."

"Good. That is the easiest way to get rid of them."

"When that is done," pursued the woman, "I am in hopes that we will not be molested again until we have had time to accomplish what we came here to do. We are on the track of the treasure that has been buried here so many years, and that, with the one we have brought from Mexico, will make you all very rich for the remainder of your lives. But I must be assured that I can rely upon your loyalty, even to these men's deaths. Now, what have you to say? You speak, Ignacio."

"There is no need to speak, señora. You know."

"Thank you."

"Only, you have not gone far enough, señora."

"No? Why not?"

"There are three other lives, now within these walls under us, which also should be sacrificed."

She shrugged her shoulders, was silent a moment, then replied:

"Perhaps you are right, Ignacio. What do you say, Patricio?"

"You have already received my opinion on that point," was the gruff reply.

"Yes. I know. But they—those three to whom Ignacio referred—are all related to me."

"One of them is not; that is, he is not related by blood."

"No; but the others are. One is my own sister—my twin sister, in fact. The other is her son; my nephew."

"Well, what of that? They are alive, and while they live, now, they are a constant menace to all of us."

"It is true."

"Then, for the sake of the safety of the rest, it is your duty to sacrifice them."

Again she was silent for a long time, and then she said tentatively:

"I will have no hand in it, Patricio."

"You need not even know about it," he replied.

She laughed shortly.

"Then I wash my hands of it," she said. "Do your will with them, but do not let me know about it; now, or after it is done."

"You consent?"

"I have washed my hands of it. I have nothing to say."

"Then, Carmen, go below to your room and wait there for me. I will come presently. But now leave Ignacio and the others here with me. I will soon settle all of it."

She arose without another word, passed to the entrance through the roof by which she had come, and disappeared. Then Patricio addressed those who remained.

"You are all agreed, I suppose, that Ignacio and I are right about this?" he asked.

They nodded in silent assent.

"There are three, then, who must receive a quietus this night. There are five of us here who are agreed that it shall be done. Shall we draw lots to determine who shall do the three deeds?"

They assented, and he prepared five slips of paper of different lengths, all of which he dropped into the crown of his hat. Then he announced:

"These slips are all so nearly of the same length that no one will be able to tell by the mere feel of them which is short and which is long. We will draw

from the hat. I will draw last, and Ignacio will draw next before me;" and then he indicated the order in which the other three should draw. And he added: "He who draws the shortest slip of all shall have the boy for his part of the duty; the next shortest shall care for the mother of the boy; and the third shortest shall take Don José. Now, if you are ready, we will proceed. After you have drawn, hold your slips concealed inside your hands until we have all drawn, after which we will compare them. Now."

They came forward in the order named and each selected one of the slips and stepped back again; and then the comparisons were made.

And it fell out that the death of the boy devolved upon Don Patricio. The death of Donna Mercedes devolved upon Ignacio, and the murder of Don José fell to the lot of another one whom they called Miguel.

"Come," said Patricio, then. "We each know what is to be done. Let there be no delay;" and they crossed the roof to the skylight, and disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE NIGHT IN THE CASTLE.

Doubtless there had never been a time in the career of Nick Carter when he had so wished for the presence of one of his assistants as he did at that moment.

In front of him there had just passed into the house through the skylight three men bent upon committing three separate murders. There was no thought in the minds of any of them to delay the commission of the acts that had been assigned to them; and behind them, waiting on the roof, were only two men to prevent the base deed.

It seemed to Nick at the moment that one of the crimes would succeed in spite of all that he could do to prevent it.

He might, by acting quickly, prevent one of them in person. Secundino might prevent another; but even that much seemed impossible of accomplishment.

Not yet all that it was possible for them to do was to follow the assassins into the castle, and attempt what they could to prevent the crimes.

To have attacked the five men when they were upon the roof drawing lots, would have been worse than useless, since not only were they five to one, but the noise made in the struggle that must have followed, would have attracted others to the scene, and the effort would have failed.

And now they had gone; and Patricio, the last to descend, had drawn down the covering of the skylight after him.

It must not be supposed, because of this digression here, that either Nick Carter or his companion hesitated, or wasted an instant when they were alone.

As if by common consent they started toward the skylight the moment Patricio disappeared, and as Nick Carter raised it so that they might follow the assassins, he whispered to Secundino:

"Follow Miguel and protect your master. There is a chance that Tranquilino may have been permitted to occupy the room with his mother. If that is so, Patricio and Ignacio will have to go to the same place to commit their crimes."

Secundino nodded.

He understood perfectly well that two of them could not be in three places at the same time; and he was accustomed to obeying orders. Besides, he was content to leave Tranquilino to the detective, and to undertake to save his master, himself.

It was a stone stairway that led from the skylight to the interior of the building, and at the foot of it Nick whispered again to his companion.

"We may never get out of this alive, Secundino," he said, "but let's give a good account of ourselves while we are here. We shall probably stir up a regular hornet's nest. See to it that they do not sting you to death, until you have at least done some stinging yourself."

"You may be sure of that," returned Secundino.

There was nothing to guide either of our friends in their further advance. All signs of the five men, who had preceded them down the stairway from the roof had disappeared, and there was nothing to indicate to the detective or to Secundino how they should proceed now that they had arrived at the foot of the stone stairway and were at last within that mysterious castle.

The detective's knowledge, however, of the conditions with which he was surrounded was much greater than it had been.

He knew now that Don José and his wife Mercedes were alive as yet; he had proof positive, for the evidence had fallen from the lips of the would-be assassins as to this fact.

But he did not know, and there was apparently no means of immediately determining, how many desperate men inhabited that castle, prepared at any moment to fight desperately to uphold their mistress in her criminal acts and plans.

"It is better that we should separate here, Secun-

dino," the detective whispered to him. "You take the corridor that leads to the left and I will follow over into the right wing of the building. There is not a moment to lose if we are to prevent these contemplated crimes."

Without another word, he glided away, leaving Secundino where he was, and giving no more thought to what the Mexican might do or fail to do.

The detective's knowledge of the interior of the castle was not real knowledge at all, but merely conjecture, which was based upon the study he had devoted to the outside of the building.

It was evident, however, that the prisoners were confined to the rooms on the second floor, and it was the detective's idea that Carmen would keep them separated, unless her heart had softened sufficiently to permit Tranquilino and his mother to be together. It must be remembered that the detective had never seen Donna Mercedes, Tranquilino's mother. His only knowledge concerning her personal appearance consisted in the fact that she so closely resembled her sister, Carmen, that one might readily pass for the other under the proper conditions.

The stairway he had descended from the roof landed him upon the second floor, and when he hurried away, leaving Secundino as has been described, he went toward the south wing of the building.

Strangely enough, save for a single lamp which burned in the wide hallway, there was now no sign anywhere that the castle was occupied, and he had passed from the main building into the wing and paused at the first door which opened off from it to listen for a moment when another door at the end of the hall toward the rear of the building was thrown open, permitting a stream of light to issue from it, and he heard the voice of Carmen Argamonte raised in shrill laughter.

He drew back as quickly as possible into the embrasure of the doorway where he was standing in order thus to conceal himself from observation; and, standing thus, he heard Carmen's voice say in a mocking tone:

"I hope you will rest well to-night, sister, and I thank you will."

Then Tranquilino's voice replied to it:

"You are a bad woman if you are my mama's sister," said the boy, and Nick recognized the fact then that, notwithstanding all the dangers and perils through which Tranquilino had passed, the courageous lad had lost none of his native courage and fortitude.

Then another voice came to him, and the detective did not doubt that it belonged to Tranquilino's mother.

It was softly musical in its character, and the woman spoke as if she had resigned herself to the inevitable and had already given up all hope of rescue for herself and those she loved.

"Carmen," he heard her say, and he could observe the attitude she assumed and the beseeching expression in her eyes, "let me try once more to persuade you against yourself. I do not plead with you for my own sake, but for my boy's and for yours. Think for a moment, my sister, what you are doing and what the consequences inevitably must be."

"Don't preach to me," Carmen interrupted her rudely.

"I am not preaching, sister, I am pleading, and as I said before I am not pleading for my own life or liberty. You have already stolen the latter, and I have no doubt that your inclination is to deprive me of the former. Indeed, your words when you spoke just now expressing the hope that I might rest well this night were too significant for me to misunderstand. There is murder in the air here, for I can feel it all about me; but, Carmen, think of your own soul. Don't forget that I am your twin sister and that this boy for whose life I am pleading with you now, is almost as much a part of you as he is of me."

There was a moment of silence after this, and then in a voice that was somewhat perturbed, although none the less ironical and threatening, Carmen replied:

"I have gone too far, Mercedes, in what I undertook to accomplish to even think of turning back now. I repeat to you I hope you will rest well this night, and I have no doubt that you will do so."

She came out of the room then through that bar of light which streamed from the doorway, and for a moment stood there plainly in view of the detective and as if she were in the limelight of a theatrical stage.

She stopped there for a moment, and then, with a mocking laugh, pulled the door shut after her, locked it, drew the key, and came swiftly in the direction where Nick Carter was standing only partly concealed in the embrasure of the doorway into which he had withdrawn.

If it had not been for Carmen's preoccupation following upon the scene which had just been enacted, she must have discovered the detective; but as it was, she passed him by with never a suspicion of his presence there.

She had gone on but a few steps and was at that part of the corridor which entered upon the main building—which was that part of the castle directly beneath the tower—when in the dim light thrown out by the lamp already mentioned, Don Patricio suddenly appeared moving swiftly toward her.

They met at a point not more than twenty feet distant from where Nick Carter was standing and began a low-toned conversation, all of which the detective was enabled to overhear.

"She suspects," the detective heard Carmen say, and the remark was followed by an uneasy laugh, denoting that the woman of such bloody proclivities was nevertheless plainly disturbed by the near approach of the tragedies she had planned.

"What does she suspect?" asked Don Patricio.

"The truth," replied Carmen; and the man shrugged his shoulders and chuckled audibly.

"Tell me what you are going to do and how you intend to accomplish it," said Carmen, after a moment, and again the man chuckled as if he were pleased with the part he had assayed to perform that night, and he answered her:

"It was one of the stipulations you made, Carmen, that you are to remain uninformed about the entire circumstances. Go to your room and stay there. Read if you like or smoke some of your cigarettes, but forget, I beg of you, that there exists in the world such persons as Donna Mercedes and her boy, for I assure you they will soon have ceased to exist."

They both stood there silently for a moment after that, and Nick Carter had just started forward toward them, determined to run the risk of startling every inhabitant of the castle into activity when they turned and moved in the opposite direction, thus going away from him, while at the same moment, voices came from the extremity of the hall and two more men appeared.

The detective withdrew quickly again to his place of concealment, for he realized that the time was not ripe for him to undertake any sort of attack.

He watched them until they had moved along together almost to the other end of the building and had passed into a room, the door of which they left ajar so that their voices still came plainly to the detective, although they were too far distant for him to comprehend what was said.

He was undecided then what to do; whether to steal along the hallway toward them and listen to what they were saying or to go in the opposite direction and endeavor to convey some warning to Mercedes and Tranquilino through the panels of the closed and locked door of their room.

It was the latter idea which he selected to follow.

He had reached the door of the room wherein the woman and her son were prisoners when he recalled the fact that he had in his pocket that wonderful little picklock with the utility of which the readers of the Nick Carter histories are entirely familiar.

Suddenly he withdrew it and applied it to the purpose for which it was designed, working as rapidly and as silently as was possible under the circumstances.

We, who know Nick Carter's expertness in matters of this kind can realize that it required only a moment for him to shoot back the bolt of the lock which confined the woman and her son to that room, and then he turned the knob, opened the door just far enough to admit the passage of his body, stepped swiftly through and closed it after him as quickly as possible in order to obviate, to as great an extent as he could, the danger of discovery, which the light that streamed out from the room made prominent.

He heard a low exclamation of surprise and dismay from Mercedes, and a quick cry of joyous recognition from Tranquilino.

And so he found himself face to face with the woman and the boy he had so diligently sought, and whose lives were so terribly threatened that night.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BLACK ROOM.

It must be remembered that Nick Carter and this woman for whom he had really done so much had never met until now, and it must be borne in mind also that doubtless Mercedes had never had opportunity even to hear about the detective until during the few weeks that had passed since the boy had been stolen from his protectors this last time.

Still, it was evident that the glad cry of recognition which came so involuntarily from the lips of Tranquilino the moment he saw Nick Carter informed her of his identity, and she took a quick step toward him with both hands extended while she exclaimed:

"You are Señor Carter, the savior of my boy."

In form and features she was almost an exact counterpart of her sister, Carmen, and Nick Carter could understand how a casual observer might readily mistake either one for the other.

But a close observer, one who looked into the heart of things, could never be mistaken in this respect.

It was in the personality and the surrounding atmosphere wherein was the great point of difference between the two women.

Have you ever entered a beautifully furnished room on a cold winter's day where a fire has not been lighted for weeks? and have you at another time gone into that same room when it was warmed and comfortable, and when a glowing fire was burning in a grate? If you have done these things, it will explain to you exactly the difference between these two women. Outwardly they were the same. So far as he could determine, there was no perceptible difference and one had only to enter the presence of Mercedes to feel the warmth of her personality and to realize that here was a good woman, indeed.

"It has been my good fortune, señora," said the detective, "to be of some service to Tranquilino, whom I have learned to love almost as if he were my own boy. I am here now to serve him and you."

"Thank Heaven for that," she exclaimed.

"I overheard what passed between you and your sister just now," the detective continued, "and you are correct about the significance of her remark when she bade you good night."

"I knew it. I felt it," was the murmured reply.

"It seems," pursued Nick Carter, "that we have arrived upon the scene at the right moment."

"Oh!" she exclaimed half-breathlessly. "If only you could have come sooner. If only I could have known you a year ago or even a few months ago. It might have been possible for you also to have saved my husband."

"To save your husband?" asked Nick, not quite understanding.

She nodded for a moment and went on:

"They have murdered him; Mr. Carter, just as tonight they would have put an end to my life and to Tranquilino's, had you not come here to save us."

"But your husband is not dead, señora."

"No a dead!" she replied, and shook her head disbelieving.

"He is alive," said Nick Carter. "He is somewhere in this castle at the present moment imprisoned as you and Tranquilino have been, in one of its rooms."

"No, no," she murmured, "you are deceived. Carmen has assured me that he is dead."

"Then Carmen has lied, señora, for this very night in the conversation which I overheard, they spoke of him as living; and I should tell you at once that Secundino is here with me and is even now searching through the other parts of this castle to find him and save him even as I have sought for and found you and will presently save you and little Lino."

She came a step nearer to him with her hands clasped tightly together and with tears in her eyes.

"Heaven bless you," she murmured.

Nick thought that already he might have delayed there too long, for he had hoped that it might be possible to take these two prisoners from the room and to get them outside the castle before the would-be assassins should seek them; and now he stepped quickly to the door after having extinguished the light, and uttered a few words of caution to his companions.

But before he opened the door he stationed them just inside of it, whispering to them that they should stand silently until he had time to investigate what might be going on outside the room.

Then he opened the door, stepping half-way across the threshold, but he drew back on the instant, for not twenty feet away from him Don Patricio followed by three men was moving swiftly in that direction.

If Nick Carter had been alone and not accompanied by a woman and a boy, whose lives would have been seriously endangered, he would not have hesitated to make an attack upon these four men single-handed in the darkness, knowing that it would be more than likely that he could overcome two or three of them and render them senseless before they would understand what was happening.

But as the circumstances were, discretion was by far the better part of valor, and so he stepped quickly inside the door again, closing it softly after him.

Instantly he pressed Mercedes and Tranquilino closely against the wall beside the door-jamb and to the right of it, and they waited there breathlessly for further developments.

In a moment more the low murmur of voices came to Nick Carter's ears from beyond the door, then the knob rattled and turned and the door itself was pushed open.

"Carmen must have forgotten to lock the door," he heard Patricio mutter in Spanish. "It's as dark as a pocket in here, too. Come on!"

The light that burned in the hallway was distant from that door, and yet a sufficient ray came from it so that the four men as they passed across the threshold were plainly visible to Nick Carter and his two trembling companions, although the men themselves could not see their intended victims.

Patricio led the way into the room closely followed

by the other three and fortunately it did not occur to any of them to close the door behind them.

Then there was the sound made by the striking of a match in the hands of Patricio, and, at the same instant, Nick Carter pushed the woman and the boy across the threshold into the hall, followed them and swiftly and silently closed the door.

He knew that scarcely a minute of time would elapse before Patricio would discover that his prey had somehow escaped him and that a pursuit, or, rather, a search for them, would be immediately begun.

He knew also that as yet his own presence in the castle was not suspected.

He remembered the remark that Patricio had uttered when he entered the room accompanied by his three assassins to the effect that Carmen had forgotten to lock the door, and he conjectured therefore that Patricio's mental explanation of the absence of Mercedes and Tranquilino from it would be that having found the door unlocked, they had fled together from the room, and were at that moment wandering somewhere about the interior of the castle, searching for a hiding-place, or for the means of escape from the building.

There was no one in the corridor when he with his companions fled from the room, and he stooped instantly, taking Tranquilino in his arms.

At the same time he grasped one of Mercedes' hands, and, leading her thus, they hurried down the corridor toward the main part of the building.

The detective had suddenly remembered the existence of the tower in the center of the castle, which has already been described, and inasmuch as he had little hope of being able to escape from the building altogether before he would be pursued and overtaken, and because there was still less hope that even if he succeeded in accomplishing that much, he could still expect to escape them in the woods that surrounded the castle. He hit upon the tower as a means of temporary safety at least.

Naturally there would be only one stairway leading to it, and Nick Carter believed that if once he could gain the top of this stairway he would be able to hold it against all the men and desperadoes that Don Pedro and Carmen Aguanaga could bring against him.

The stairway through the roof by which he had descended with Tranquilino to the upper floor of the building was not like those usually built on the outside of a house, but was surrounded by a door, and appeared from the hallway of the house as if it entered upon a room.

Nick remembered, as he had passed along the hall in search of Mercedes and her boy, he had looked eagerly on every side for another such place and had discovered it as he supposed near the center of the building.

It was toward this that he now made his way so rapidly, carrying the boy in his arms and holding Mercedes by the hand.

He reached the door and opened it, hoping almost against hope that it would be the one he sought, and just at that very moment Patricio and the three men with him ran from the room from which the prisoners had escaped, shouting a warning as he did so that rang through the entire building.

Nick opened the door and thrust Mercedes through it, knowing that it would be a present means of concealment whether it had led to the tower or not.

He closed it the instant they were over the threshold and ran his disengaged hand rapidly up and down the edge in search of fastenings; and discovered to his surprise and delight a huge iron bolt and a socket fast to the door, into which he quickly pushed it.

They were in utter darkness, of course, but that did not long continue, for the detective's electric torch was in his pocket and he pressed the button, fastened it down, and threw the light around him.

It was with a feeling of some dismay not lessened by the fact that Mercedes uttered a little cry of alarm that they discovered the fact that they were inside a room, which could not have been more than ten feet in extent in either direction, and from which there was apparently no other means of egress save that door now bolted against their enemies by which they had entered it.

The walls of this square room were smooth and even and of stone, and there was not a sign of any article whatever anywhere within.

This fact in a measure reassured the detective for a moment, since it suggested that the apartment was not used at all for any purpose, and it was too small and dark to have been utilized for anything other than a closet or a store-room.

He hoped that in the search that was being made for Mercedes and the boy this room might be overlooked, for, should it be discovered that the door had been bolted on the inside, Patricio would know at once he had found the hiding-place of the fugitives.

Behind that bolted door there was a set of [illegible]

for the detective and the two persons he was seeking to rescue.

Either they must starve, or die of thirst, within this room in the event of the men of the castle not battering down the door; or Nick Carter must take his chances of leaping outside alone and engaging single-handed in a combat with Patricio and his men.

It was while he was turning these thoughts over in his mind that he heard the rush of feet outside the door, the handle was turned, an exclamation of satisfaction was indulged in, and he heard the voice of Don Patricio shout in glee to his companions:

"They are in the black room."

There was a moment of silence after that, broken presently by the murmur of voices outside, made while Patricio and the men with him conversed in low tones regarding what should next be done; and this was followed by a distinct rapping upon the door and the voice of Patricio called out:

"Mercedes, are you there?"

Nick Carter touched her lips with his fingers to indicate that she was to make no present reply, for he had already extinguished the light of his electric torch for the double reason that he desired to save the battery as much as possible and also that he did not know at what moment he might require the use of both his hands in one of the greatest struggles he had ever undertaken.

Then the rapping was repeated louder than before, and the voice of Patricio cried out again:

"Mercedes, are you there? Answer me, or we will break the door in and find out the truth."

The detective leaned toward her and whispered: "Answer him."

Mercedes called out in reply to the don's question: "Yes, I am here."

"And is the beautiful little Tranquilino with you?" inquired Patricio, and he laughed out exultantly when he put the question.

"Yes," said Mercedes, again prompted by the detective.

"Do you realize in what room you have sought refuge?" was the next question.

"I realize only that it affords me a momentary respite from your persecution," she retorted.

Again Don Patricio laughed exultantly.

"I will tell you what room it is, Mercedes," he shouted. "It is called the black room of the castle. It has no outlet save this door between us, and there are bolts and bars on this side of the door as you may have noticed, and now, Mercedes, shall I tell you what I intend to do?"

"Don't answer now," said Nick, whispering.

"I will tell you," called out Patricio again, after a moment of silence. "I will fasten the bolts and the bars on this side of the door, and we will withdraw for a time to give you an opportunity to meditate upon the plight into which you have now thrust yourself. Presently the air in that room will become vitiated, for it has no means of ventilation, and, even if you and Tranquilino do not suffocate, you will starve and become so thirsty presently that you will rap upon the door and beg me for mercy."

They heard him indulge in another one of his heartless laughs, and this was followed by the sounds made by shooting the bolts into place, and then retreating footsteps told the detective and his two companions that they were left alone, apparently hopeless prisoners in a room from which there was no exit.

CHAPTER X.

THE SECRET OF THE CASTLE.

The circumstance in which Nick Carter and his companions found themselves was not enviable, as the reader may well imagine.

But Nick Carter possessed one of those natures which never despaired, and, moreover, he had never yet found himself in all his experience in a plight from which he could not in some way extricate himself.

Again, as he thought the matter over calmly after they were left alone, and after he had bidden Mercedes to remain quiet, he decided in his own mind that the logical explanation of the presence of such a room as that one, and its location in relation to the other rooms of the castle and to the tower was that it had some distinct utility, and was not what it appeared to be, a mere closet.

He remembered that this castle in the mountains of Vermont had been built by a refugee Frenchman at the time of Louis XIV., when secret passages, concealed doors, and mysterious rooms were not only fads but were often of extreme utility.

The refugee in building this castle would not have departed from a custom with which his entire training had imbued him, and it occurred to Nick Carter then that it were barely possible, even if not probable, that this very closetlike room might offer him the best

means of escape he could have found from their present difficulties.

He lost no time in fixing his light again so that it would burn steadily, and, having done so, began a most thorough examination of the smooth walls by which they were surrounded.

These were all stone as has been said. Indeed, the entire building, partitions and all, was stone, and only the doors and such other parts of the structure as could not be made with the imperishable material were wood.

But Nick Carter noticed a difference between the material used in the construction of this room and that of the other interior walls of the building.

Where, in other cases the stones were rough and uneven and often jagged, just as they had been blown from the quarries by means of drills and powder, here in this room they had been chipped and polished to a surface that was almost smooth and quite even, denoting that much more care had been devoted to it than to the other portions of the castle.

He argued that there should be reason for this.

It was hardly logical that an inside room, not more than ten feet square, having no window at all and only one door, should have been finished off with such deliberate care unless there had been a special object in so doing.

And that object could have been only the one already suggested.

His first care was to examine the floor, and he went from stone to stone with his light, paying close attention to every filling of plaster between them until he was thoroughly satisfied that there was no means of escape in that direction.

Next, he began at one corner, running his light up and down, and working his way gradually toward the left, leaving no inch of the surface without careful inspection; and he had proceeded in this manner almost entirely around the room until, in fact, he was only a few feet of the point where he started when he came upon a stone that was much smaller than any of the others.

He pounded upon it with his hand and sought presently with the point of his knife to dig away the plaster around it, and it was in this manner that he presently fell upon the secret he sought.

A portion of the plaster at one side of the stone, or, rather, a portion of it that seemed to be plaster and yet was not, proved to be a piece of wood painted in imitation, and when he pressed the point of his knife against it, it sank tightly as the point of a knife inevitably will do when thrust into soft and yielding wood.

When he drew the knife back toward him, that section of wood six inches long and not more than half an inch in width came with it, disclosing a narrow aperture behind it, in which the detective quickly perceived a metal ring barely large enough for him to thrust his middle finger through it when he pulled it outward toward him.

Fastened to the ring, and extending from it through a small hole not larger than his little finger was a chain, and both the ring and the chain were of bronze.

Having thrust his middle finger through the ring as described, he turned and whispered to Mercedes:

"I think, señora, that I have discovered the secret of this place, but you must be brave to face a disappointment if one should happen, for we must not forget that not only many generations, but actual centuries have passed probably since any one has pulled upon this bronze chain."

Mercedes stood with clasped hands and bated breath, and even Nick Carter's heart beat more rapidly with suppressed excitement while he pulled slowly and steadily upon that chain which seemed incapable of supporting any very great weight.

For a moment it resisted him.

Then it began to give gently, and he felt that in response to the pressure he put upon it, something was moving somewhere.

Slowly but surely the chain gave forth through the hole that has been described until he pulled it at least four feet after which, in spite of his further effort, it refused to come any farther.

Fearing lest it should spring back into place if he should relinquish his hold upon it, he called Mercedes to his side and asked her to grasp the chain while he examined the room with his light; for as yet he had discovered nothing that would open a way of escape for them as a result of his discovery of the ring and chain.

Again he threw his light upon the floor where before there was nothing to be seen, then he circled it around the room against the side walls and with the same result. It occurred to him then that his discovery was not to bear fruit, but as he turned the light toward the ceiling, Mercedes, who had raised her eyes in silent prayer, uttered a startled exclamation and with her disengaged hand pointed upward.

At the same time Tranquillin cried out:

"See! see! Look there, Don Nicholas!"

Directly over their heads in the very center of the ceiling an aperture had unaccountably been created.

It was a square hole through the upper ceiling of the room from which Nick Carter, straining upon the chain, had doubtless withdrawn a stone or perhaps a section of hard wood made and painted in imitation of one.

Of all events, there was the hole adequately large to permit of the passage of a man's body, although there appeared to be no means whatever of reaching it, for the ceiling was at least ten feet from the floor, and, therefore, more than four feet above Nick Carter's head.

For a moment he stared at it unblinkingly, and then with a sudden cry of pleasure, he turned, lifted Tranquilino in his arms, told the boy to stiffen his knees, thrust the electric torch into one of his hands, and so pushed him upward until the boy's head disappeared into the aperture already described.

"What do you discover, Tranquilino?" the detective asked, suppressing his excitement as well as he could.

"Lift me higher," replied the boy, without directly replying to the question.

Nick did so and called to Tranquilino to climb out into the room above them, to search it with the light he carried, and to try and discover something there which might be lowered into the room beneath.

Tranquilino disappeared utterly for a space of time, which seemed endless to the two who were waiting so expectantly beneath him, but which was really scarcely more than a minute.

Then he called down through the opening to the detective, saying:

"There is nothing here at all, señor, to help you to climb up."

It seems a very small thing to overcome when one considers that only about four feet of space was between this man and woman and liberty, or, at least, the expectation of liberty.

It would have been an easy matter for the detective to lift Mercedes so that she could seize the sides of the opening, and by his assistance from beneath and Tranquilino's help from above, climb through it to temporary safety, but there was no way possible when they should accomplish this whereby he could follow, since the sides of the hole above the opening were too high for him to hope to reach them by jumping and because neither the woman nor the boy possessed sufficient strength materially to aid him.

Plainly, if both were to leave that room in which they were imprisoned, Nick Carter must go first.

Once he were at the top, he could find a way to assist Mercedes to attain it; and all this time Tranquilino was peering down into the hole with the electric torch in his hand, the light of which was flashing upon them.

"Mercedes," said the detective, involuntarily addressing her by her given name. "Do you think that you could persuade yourself that you are as strong as a man during ten seconds of time?"

"I do not understand you," she replied.

He took a step nearer to her, seized her hands, and placed them together in front of her so that the fingers were locked, directing her to hold them in the position in which he placed them, then he said to her:

"Do you think, señora, that you could brace yourself so that you can hold my weight for just an instant in your hands as I have placed them?"

She understood that, and she smiled.

"I will try," she said.

He had placed her so that she was standing directly underneath the hole from which Tranquilino's face was peering down at them, but Nick now directed the boy to stand aside and to throw his light directly across the hole in the ceiling, but above it.

"Now, Mercedes," he said. "Brace yourself so that you will be able to resist my weight, and for just one instant it will be much more than my actual weight, for, in order to accomplish what I have planned, I must step with my left foot into your hands as I have fixed them, and then must spring upward in an effort to reach through the hole and so gain the top."

"I am ready," she replied, after a moment.

We need not describe in detail the carrying out of this idea. Suffice it to say that the first and second efforts were failures, and it was not until the third one that the desired result was accomplished.

Then Nick Carter succeeded in getting his fingers over the edge through the hole in the ceiling, and victory was practically attained.

In a moment more he had drawn himself up, and, with his great strength, it was a small matter for him to gain a position beside Tranquilino.

He did not wait then to investigate his surroundings, but quickly turning, he lowered himself, head downward through the opening, clinging above him simply by means of his bent knees as you have seen many an athlete hang over a horizontal bar.

In obedience to his command, Mercedes reached upward so that he seized her by the arms above the elbows. Then, raising her as far as he could, she seized upon his clothing and held herself there. He raised her farther and farther until with the assistance of Tranquilino she gained the object sought.

The light of his electric torch showed him where the square block of wood made in imitation of a huge stone had been lifted from its place by means of the chain which he had pulled, and he found no difficulty in replacing it, realizing as he did so that the bronze chain and ring had been pulled back into place where he had found them, and that nothing but the absence

of the narrow strip of wood he had removed from the space behind the stone in the room below would remain to suggest to Don Patricio and his followers, when they should come there, to indicate the method of the prisoners' escape.

But that would be a very slight evidence and might escape their notice, unless they should search as diligently as Nick Carter had done.

CHAPTER XI.

AT THE END OF THE STRING.

The room in which the detective now found himself, when he cast the light about him, was very much larger than the one from which they had escaped so fortunately.

The detective saw at a glance that on the north side it extended over and beyond one of the partitions of the lower room; and as he stepped that way, he quickly discovered the reason, for there uncovered, and hence distinctly in view, was a flight of stone steps descending into the darkness, which evidently passed behind the partition mentioned.

Without an instant's hesitation he turned to his companions, and, again taking Tranquilino in his arms to carry him, directed Mercedes to follow, and with the light in his electric torch fixed, began the descent.

It was a remarkable place in which they found themselves.

The stairway descended thirteen steps or until Nick believed they were about on the level with the floor they had just left, then it turned abruptly to the right, and there were thirteen more steps down to another landing, then thirteen steps down again to the right and so on until they had wound in this way down five turns like those already described, and they reached a square room twenty feet in extent in either direction or, in other words, exactly the size of the tower which lifted itself above the main roof of the castle.

As Nick Carter figured it out, the tower had been the first structure erected by that French refugee. He had built the castle around it later; and the secret stairway down which Nick Carter and his companions had come merely wound round and round the inner walls of the tower, they having been erected precisely for the purpose now disclosed.

This large square room in which they now found themselves was vacant, save for rotting pieces of wood that were scattered about it.

But directly above Nick's eyes, set into the wall opposite him, was a roughly made door of two timbers fastened together with straps of iron and bolts, and fastened shut by a heavy iron latch which extended across it; and this latch was so rusted that it almost crumbled in the grasp of the detective when he seized upon it.

The door, released from its fastenings, fell from its place with a crash, disclosing a black opening beyond it from which a rush of air greeted them upon the instant.

For a moment the detective stood peering doubtfully in the opening, and then he turned with a smile to Mercedes.

"Señora," he said, "this is without doubt our way to liberty. I have an idea that it will be found to communicate with the same cavern in which I have already made my camp. However, that remains to be seen, for I may be entirely wrong."

"We cannot go back," she replied, smiling, "and so whatever awaits us our only way is forward."

"Yes," said Nick, "follow me."

There was every indication that the part of their journey upon which they now entered was through a natural cavern, or, at least, through one which had been excavated so long that it had become quite natural in its appearance.

As they went forward Nick discovered signs that it was largely, although not wholly, the work of man, and he conjectured that it was in reality an extension of the cavern which the Frenchman had enlarged for his own purposes.

They had proceeded only a short distance, possibly two hundred feet, when the light from Nick Carter's torch disclosed another door in the side of the gallery exactly like the one that had fallen uselessly beside them when they left the room beneath the tower.

Nick was passing it, for the gallery extended straight onward ahead of them, when something impelled him to step aside and open this other door.

It fell into utter disuse and decay as the other had done, but in falling it disclosed a place where a tomb-like cavity had been hollowed out of the earth and rock.

As the detective threw his light inside this place, it discovered to him a number of heavy hard-wood cases bound with bronze, each one having had burned into its cover the inscription "J. de B.," which were doubtless the initials of that same French refugee under whose direction the mysterious castle had been built.

And here before Nick Carter's eyes was, without doubt, the legendary fortune in gold and jewels which he had taken with him from France, and which had been here hidden away and useless since that time.

But there was no opportunity now to investigate further concerning the treasure which it undoubtedly was.

There was always the possibility of an immediate pursuit, and, handicapped as the detective was by the presence of the woman and the boy, whom it was his duty to protect, there could be no thought now of anything but safety.

The reclamation of the treasure could await another and a more opportune moment.

It was safe to say, however, that there was no doubt that a thorough belief in the existence of this treasure was the explanation of the presence of Carmen Agramonte in the castle, and, indeed, in America.

Nor had Nick forgotten that there was still another treasure to be sought—the one stolen from the hacienda in Mexico.

But of that he had no care at the present moment. The lives of these two unfortunate companions of his were the all important consideration until Mercedes and her son should be conveyed to a place of safety.

It was a great regret to the detective that he had been able to do nothing whatever while still inside the castle to assist Secundino in that part of the duties which fell to his portion; but no man can accomplish more than one definite purpose at a time, and, moreover, the detective felt entire faith in Secundino's ability to accomplish what he had set out to do.

He had no means of determining in what direction they were traveling, save that it was not the one toward the cavern where he had made his camp before his visit to the castle, for now the cavernous gallery made many turns to the right and to the left, frequently ascending to higher levels and then descending to ones, still lower until, in spite of all he could do to the contrary, his sense of direction was lost.

But the pure sweet air they breathed told Nick Carter better than anything else could have done that somewhere ahead of him there was an opening, and that ultimately he would find it, he felt assured.

Mercedes had, however, become very greatly fatigued, as her deep sighs uttered frequently manifested, while Tranquilino had fallen into a deep sleep in his adored protector's arms.

And now Nick sought to assist Mercedes in their onward march, directing her to hold the electric torch so that the light would flare ahead of him while he half-lifted her, and, at times, almost carried her along the rough, uneven and sometimes jagged pathway.

Several times as they progressed, he stopped to listen for sounds of pursuit, but none came to his ears, and he could only hope that Patricio was keeping good to the threat he had uttered when he had said that he would leave his prisoners shut up in the black room until suffocation or starvation or thirst compelled them to call to him for assistance.

For once Nick Carter hoped the man might be as cruel as he threatened to be, for unless he were so, he might relent at the suffering he was visiting upon his supposed prisoners and visit the black room to liberate them or to offer to do so.

Of course, the door of that room was still bolted on the inside, but, nevertheless, a heavy beam of wood propelled against it would soon demolish it, and the black room would in that case show that it had lost its occupants.

Would Patricio then discover how the inmates of the room had escaped? Would he have sight keen enough and an instinct shrewd enough to search for and discover the little bamboo ring now only partly concealed in its aperture between the stones since Nick Carter had torn away the strip of wood that had hidden it, and which had fallen to the floor.

And so they hurried onward until it became evident to the detective that Mercedes was utterly incapable of further effort.

They had reached the point where the gallery widened perceptibly, and was higher, and here the detective presently found a place that was smoother than the others, and, removing his coat, he rolled it into a pillow for Mercedes' head, and directed her to lie down.

So utterly fatigued had she become that scarcely a moment passed before she was asleep, and the detective placed the boy beside her, wishing heartily that he had a blanket to throw over them to protect them from the chill of the cavern.

He found a cigar in one of his pockets, which he lighted and smoked in silence while he watched over his charges, until his own eyes became heavy with drowsiness, and he would have slumbered also, had he not started to his feet and strolled up and down the cavern seeking exercise as a preventative.

His watch told him that it was now almost one o'clock in the morning.

What obstacles Secundino had encountered in his effort to rescue Don José had either been overcome by this time or he had fallen before them.

Also, Chick had long since doubtless found Patsy where he had gone in search of him at the cavern in the ravine; and then, as this thought occurred to the detective, he recalled the fact that he was doubtless at that moment in one of the galleries of the same cavern.

"If Chick has done what I think he would do under the circumstances," he thought audibly, "he and Patsy together will explore that one passageway through the cavern which we did not investigate, and which is probably this one."

He turned about and stood staring for a moment at the two sleeping figures, wondering if it would be at all safe to leave them while he searched still farther along the mysterious way that had been pursued.

He thought that there was no chance of their awakening, the only danger to be apprehended in the possibility of pursuit from the castle.

He felt through his pockets and discovered that he still had left in his possession one of the balls of twine he had provided for use in exploring the cavern, and he succeeded without awakening Mercedes, in fastening the end of it to one of her wrists, knowing that if she should awaken during his absence, it would serve as a message to her that he had put it there and would presently return.

She had already demonstrated the fact that she was a woman of unusual courage, and he relied now upon her good sense if she should awaken in the darkness and find herself alone while he was absent.

Then unwinding the string from the ball as he advanced, he hastened forward again, hoping that he might encounter his assistants, Chick and Patsy, in their exploration of the cavern. He hurried along with all the speed he dared use over such rough, and until the ball of twine was exhausted, and, without

having discovered any apparent change in the character of the cavernous gallery.

It was not safe for him to proceed any farther, because there was always the danger of an unexpected pitfall, but he stopped there for a moment and began whistling shrilly a tune which, if it were heard by either Chick or Patsy, would assure them of his presence near them.

But when he had listened and there came no response, he turned about and began to rewind his ball of twine on the return journey to the place where he had left Mercedes and Tranquilino.

Then suddenly, when the ball of twine had grown so large as to assure him that he must be nearly to the place where he had left his companions asleep, he was confronted by a startling and unexpected and utterly overwhelming fact.

The twine he had been winding so carefully, because he did not wish to put a sudden strain upon it that would arouse Mercedes from her slumbers, came suddenly to an end; and he held in his right hand, with which he had been winding it, the loop that he had fastened around Mercedes' wrist.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE CAVERN.

For a moment it seemed to the detective as if the ground had suddenly fallen from beneath his feet. The end of the string, when it came into his hand, was more like a blow in the face than a silent suggestion of what might have happened during his absence.

Had Mercedes awakened, found herself alone in the dark, and wandered off into the unknown paths of the cavern, leading Tranquilino by the hand?

Had she somehow thrown up the arm to which the loop was attached, and thus, loosening it, have lost it without knowing that it had been fastened to her at all?

Had Don Patricio, with some of his followers, come suddenly upon her and made her and the boy prisoners again?

He asked himself these questions one after another.

The second one seemed the most likely solution of the problem, although either the first or the second might be it.

But the third?

Nick did not regard that as a likely event to have happened. If Patricio *had* found his escaped prisoners, it was not likely that he would have seized upon them and have returned to the castle forthwith. He would not be content to leave the man who had saved them——

But the detective stopped right there.

He remembered suddenly that Patricio might not know of his presence there. He might have been of the opinion that Mercedes had accomplished alone and unaided all that had been done in the way of escape.

Suddenly, while he was still lost in thought over the happening, he started and whirled about, facing first in one direction and then in another, trying to locate a sound that had come to him through the gallery of the cavern; but it was next to impossible to determine from what quarter it had come, since all sounds in such a place seem to proceed from every direction at once.

But as he listened again his face brightened and he smiled to himself, for he recognized the same tune that he had whistled a little while back, when he had hoped that it would reach the ears of his two assistants or of one of them who might be searching the cavern.

He recognized now, also, from what direction the sound proceeded.

It came to him from over the same course he had been traveling, and he realized that if his twine had lasted a little longer, he would have met Chick or Patsy, or both of them.

There was joy in that realization; as there was also discomfort when he remembered that Mercedes had wandered away.

Until that instant it had not occurred to him to call out; but now he did so, raising his voice to its greatest strength, unmindful now whether it reached the ears of possible pursuers or not. Even if Don Patricio and his followers were at hand, they would find now that Chick and Patsy were within reach, that they would have something to contend with.

It was evident at once that his cries were heard, for presently there came an answer to them; and a few minutes later he saw lights approaching, and presently Patsy also came into view, carrying a torch which he held high above his head, swaying it as he advanced.

"Where is Chick?" was Nick's first greeting.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him. I supposed he was with you," replied Patsy.

"I sent him back to you with a message," said the detective.

"He did not reach me, then. I have not seen him."

"Where were you? At the mouth of the cavern, or in the depths of it?"

Patsy laughed.

"I have literally been in the depths of it," he replied, "for I fell into a hole from which I did not escape for hours. It was doubtless while I was there that Chick came back. But, anyhow, I have not been back to the mouth of the cavern since you and the others went away."

Just then another cry startled them both, but it filled Nick with pleasure, for it was a woman's voice calling in Spanish; and the detective instantly replied to it.

Then, leaving Patsy still wondering, he started away toward the sound of it, and presently came upon Mercedes where she was crouched down upon a rock at the side of the gallery.

She had been weeping, for she was still badly frightened.

She explained that she had awakened suddenly, and, starting to her feet, had called out to him, but, receiving no reply, she had called louder, which had roused Tranquilino.

Then a terror had come over her. She thought that something dreadful must have happened while she was sleeping, and she had seized the boy and run away, going a considerable distance through the darkness before she collided with the side walls of the gallery, from which she had fallen back, senseless; and Tranquilino explained that he had been softly sobbing beside his mother ever since, until he heard the sound of Nick Carter's voice calling.

Then he had succeeded in rousing her, and—that was all; only that the cord must have slipped from Mercedes' wrist, for she had not known until that moment that it had been fastened to her.

"Well, Patsy," said the detective, at last, "since you came to this spot from the opposite direction, it must follow that the way out of the cavern is clearly before us; eh?"

"Well, not very clear, so far as the darkness is concerned; but we will have no difficulty in finding it," was the answer.

"We came from the castle; you came from the ravine; and now, Patsy, I must go back."

"What! To the castle?" asked Mercedes anxiously.

"Yes, señora. Don't forget that your husband was there somewhere when we came away. Secundino is also there, trying to save him. Chick is probably there—he is my other assistant, you know."

"Yes."

"I am going to leave you in Patsy's charge. He will conduct you to safety, and will watch over you with the same care I would do. I must be the one who goes to the castle, for the reason that I know the way, and all about its secrets, now. Patsy, look out for the señora. But I need not tell you that."

"Please let me go with you, Señor Carter," said Tranquilino, clinging to him. "I can fight, too, if you will let me."

"Brave little chap! I know that you have the heart of a lion; but, alas! my boy, your courage is greater than your strength. No; you must remain with mama and Mr. Garvan."

"And you will bring my papa back to me."

"Yes; I think so."

"And Secundino?"

"Of course."

"Then I will let you go. You won't be long, will you?"

"Not longer than is necessary, Lino."

With that they separated, Patsy leading Mercedes away and carrying the boy, while Nick Carter, armed with all the speed he feared not, back again toward the castle.

Fortune favored the detective in a manner that he had not calculated upon.

He had proceeded on the back track only a short distance when he discovered that a light was approaching him, and he extinguished his own quickly, after which he withdrew to one side and waited.

He was overjoyed presently to discover that not only was Don Patricio approaching him through the cavern, but he was alone. It was evident that he had not yet discovered the fact that Mercedes had been assisted in her escape. He must have thought that she had accomplished it all alone.

We need not picture the struggle that followed, when Patricio was close enough to be attacked. It was very short, and in a moment the Spaniard was overcome, his hands were bound behind his back, and he was marching in front of Nick Carter in the same direction that Patsy had already taken with Mercedes and the boy.

The rest of the journey to the end of the cavern, where it opened upon the ravine, was made quickly, and there Nick was again agreeably surprised, for Chick had arrived only a few minutes before him, and he had brought four prisoners with him. They were Ignacio, Manuelito, and one other of the crew who were the followers of Patricio and Carmen. And there was Carmen herself, as defiant and as beautiful as ever.

Secundino was, of course, there, too, for it was owing to his efforts at assistance, that Chick had been able to effect the captures, although his beloved master had been dead when Secundino reached him.

But there was comfort about even that.

"Don José had not been murdered. He had died quite naturally, in his bed, for he had long been ill from the effects of his imprisonment and the exposure that had followed upon it, and so, although Secundino got to him before his enemies arrived, the man had already breathed his last.

* * * * * * *

It only remains to be said that the prisoners were conveyed to the prison at Montpelier and were left there until extradition papers could be procured to take them back to Mexico where they belonged.

The stolen treasure was found, almost intact, in the castle, and with what remained of the treasure discovered in the cavern—for part of it had already disappeared—there was a very comfortable fortune for young Tranquilino.

Four days after that the detective bade the boy and his mother good-by at the train which was to take them home, and old Secundino nearly shed tears when the moment for parting came.

Tranquilino really did shed some, but he was comforted by the assurance that Nick would visit him some time at his home in the Hacienda de las Aguas.

THE END.

The new number, 622, will be "The Island of Fire, or, Nick Carter's Weird Experience."

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CHASED BY A GIANT ELEPHANT.

Many of the folks who were in the habit of going down into the basement of the Madison Square Garden before the big show began and feel the elephants popcorn and peanuts might have noticed a tall, angular, raw-boned man whose face was tanned and wrinkled to an extent that made his age hard to guess. He wasn't a handsome man, and he didn't conceal the fact that he chewed tobacco, but when he told a boogee in the elephant department to do a thing the keeper did it. The man who gave the orders was Old Pop Conklin, and he's been a show man for forty years. Most of this time has been spent in training elephants, and any circus man will tell you that nobody has had more experience or knows the elephant game any better than he. So when Pop remarks that "Elephants is like women" you ask why, if you're looking for a story, and this is the answer:

"They didn't use to mistreat me for their morals."

Don't think the old man was sore.

"Queer about elephants," he continued. "You get friendly with 'em for about six weeks every year. Yes, plumb buddy, sleep for about six weeks and then you have to keep his eye skinned night and day. Trouble? If you've never had some enough of trouble clean up in elephants look your days before you read another line. For instance:

"You're too young to remember when Barnum had Jumbo and W. W. Cole's show had Samson, and the rivalry them two between those two shows. Barnum brought Jumbo over from England and had the biggest elephant ever heard of, and Bill Cole he the biggest elephant that had been seen in this country. So he got Samson, an African elephant with the connections, he got Samson, an African elephant that was head to head with Jumbo. And there wasn't much difference between Samson and Jumbo.

"I was with Cole then—was with him for seventeen years—and I fell in love with Samson. He was ugly at times. Nothing could get excited by now in good humor or bad. Nothing could get excited by now in good humor or bad. But finally we got him so he'd step over me and do a drill. We used him in the parade to carry some investments. But we used him in the parade to carry some investments. But we had to watch him every minute, and finally he went one day between two and (blank) one day when I was walking behind him (and (blank) me for walking behind him) he turned around and (blank) me for walking behind him) he turned around and (blank) me for walking behind him) he turned around

A good many years ago there was a mullet famine along the coast. The people had to fall back on other fish, such as the humble speckled trout and the unintellectual sheepshead. It was a time of sacrifice whose memory has survived until this day, when, it is declared, the old inhabitants recall it with a shudder as they repeat their morning supplication: "Give us this day our daily mullet."

It is said that a Biloxian can pretty nearly navigate his whole career, from infancy to death and burial, with mullet as his chief dependence. When he is a baby he cuts his teeth on a piece of mullet; as a boy he fishes for it; the chief requirement in a wife is that she shall know how to cook it, and it is most consolatory when served to the funeral guests.

During the civil war the people of the mullet belt would have had mighty slim pickings if it had not been for their favorite fish. Many a Confederate soldier imprisoned by Butler on Ship Island has cause to be grateful to Biloxi bacon or black eyes, as the mullet is also called.

It is not an easy fish to land with hook and line or even to catch with a seine. "But any one who can throw a castnet to spread over a circle of twelve or fourteen feet," says an authority, "can catch enough of them in an hour to supply a dozen families."

COUNTERFEIT COINING IN JAIL.

Evil-doers are supposed to cease from troubling the outside world when they are safe within prison walls.

Not always is this so, however. For some time past the police of Rendsburg, a town in Schleswig-Holstein, have been aware that a large number of base five-mark pieces were in circulation within their jurisdiction. These counterfeit coins were all impressed with the arms of the city of Hamburg, and bore the date 1901. They had, besides, that peculiar fatty feel which silver coins have which are not coined by master craftsmen.

After some time the police happened upon a clue. The mother-in-law of one of the principal warders of a local penitentiary was discovered endeavoring to pass several false pieces. The police at once placed the house of her daughter's husband under observation; but as nothing further came to light, an alert detective, named Schneider, voluntarily went to prison, and, of course, had the run of the place.

He was not long in making the startling discovery that the false coins were regularly manufactured in the cell of a prisoner who had been sentenced to several years' penal servitude for this very crime, and aiding and abetting this person was one of the chief warders. The prisoner had told the warder where he had hidden his tools, instruments, dies, etc., which he had formerly used. The warder found all these things and brought them to the prisoner, and helped him to establish a workshop in his cell. All night long work was carried on, the metal was melted, molded, and stamped, and hammering and filing were conducted as noiselessly as possible. But the detective had sharp ears, and the hammering in the cell was heard by him.

It transpired that the coins manufactured in this way were carefully collected by the chief warder, who, with his wife and mother-in-law, put them into circulation. These were all arrested, and their disclosures led to the punishment of those concerned in the audacious crime.

HOW SOME DIAMONDS WERE SMUGGLED.

A custom house officer relates how the smuggling of a large amount of diamonds was accomplished on one occasion.

Several years ago, among a steamer's passengers was a well-known traveler, of whom it was reported that he had a large consignment of diamonds. The information was so much in detail that even their place of concealment was indicated. They were reported to be sewn in the seams of his garments, and hidden in his boot-heels.

When the ship reached port she was promptly boarded, and the officers proceeded to hunt for their quarry. A passenger approaching, cautiously whispered:

"I believe you are looking for a smuggler?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"Well, there's one who gave himself away on the voyage," pointing in the direction of a handsomely dressed man, who appeared to be strangely nervous.

A moment more and the officers were fumbling at the flaps of his coat.

"It's no use," they remarked, "we know what you have, and where it is. Better give it up and save trouble."

Apparently crushed by the discovery, the man quietly assisted in opening the seams, and produced diamonds from various portions of his clothing.

"Your boots, please."

This rather staggered him, but he submitted with good grace, and, one of his heels being unscrewed, another lot, though smaller than the first, was found there.

The gems were taken to the custom house, where the appraiser looked at them for a moment, and pronounced them to be a splendid article of paste, worth about twenty-five cents each. Those officers lost no time in getting back to the ship, but the man had quietly slipped away.

They traced him, however, to the Grand Central Hotel, and rushing thither in hot haste, found him quietly sitting in his room. They stripped him to the skin. It is needless to say that no more diamonds were found, but the officers did discover on his back the marks of the biggest kind of sticking-plaster, under which had been concealed jewels enough to buy a farm, and so recently removed that they had left their imprint on his body.

Of course, a confederate had promptly taken them away, and the officers were checkmated. It is not often that a ruse in all its details is so successfully planned and carried out.

POLICE DOGS AT WORK.

A night worker on his way home in the Prospect Park section of Brooklyn at an early morning hour recently saw a dog with a jingling tag fastened to its neck come running along the opposite side of the street. The dog ran up to the front door of a house, sniffed and was down off the porch and around to the rear like a flash.

Judging from the usual conduct of dogs the first thought was that this one was either searching for its home or looking hungrily for a stray bone.

At the next house the same performance was repeated with equal thoroughness. A little farther down the street a man swung the gate open and entered the yard at about the time the dog arrived. The dog followed him up the steps, waited until he took out his key and let himself in, then, satisfied, went on about its business.

The man, who had forgotten just at the moment that the policing of the city is now being done by improved methods, was at a loss to account for the dog's performance being repeated at every house until he saw the animal run out into the middle of the street and sniff at a dark object lying there. The dog circled around the object several times and then darted off at top speed.

In a short time it returned, followed by another dog. Not far behind the second animal was a policeman who had been trying to keep pace with the dog. Under the policeman's prodding the object moved and proved to be a man who got up and walked off uncertainly down the street.

Then the dog that had brought assistance to the intoxicated man ran on in one direction and the policeman and the other dog went the opposite way. It was Dona and Nogi, two of the police dogs, doing their duty faithfully and without any fuss.

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